

The Proditor

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/42979803) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/42979803>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV) , Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham , Hannibal Lecter , Matthew Brown (Hannibal) , Dr. Frederick Chilton , Mason Verger , Margot Verger , Jack Crawford , Dr. Cordell Doemling , Abel Gideon , Alana Bloom
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Alpha Hannibal Lecter , Omega Will Graham , Surreal , Slow Burn , Suicidal Thoughts , Angst , Mating Cycles/In Heat , Enemies to Lovers , ... and back again? , POV Hannibal Lecter , POV Will Graham , Depressed Will Graham , Possessive Hannibal Lecter , Narcissist Hannibal Lecter , Melancholy , Omega Verse , No mpreg , Case Fic , Top Hannibal Lecter , Bottom Will Graham , Sex , Politics , Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper , Hannibal Lecter is Il Mostro , Dark Will Graham , Jack Crawford Being Jack Crawford , Alana Bloom Being Alana Bloom , Will Graham Has a Dark Secret
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-12-08 Updated: 2024-04-24 Words: 114,976 Chapters: 17/19

The Proditor

by [Achleys](#)

Summary

Hannibal has spent a lifetime seeking the stunning, the new, the unique. Challenge after challenge to conquer and slay, to quell the boredom that aches in his limbs like a disease.

When he learns that Will Graham has presented omega, the claws of obsession dig deep. Hannibal expects a surly plaything capable of infusing his life with an astounding – if only temporary – burst of color. What he finds is a man determined not only to set the world on fire, but to laugh as he himself suffocates in smoke.

Once conquered, Will Graham will be Hannibal's most fantastic trophy yet.

Notes

To J. Salem (BloodyWar2411), for the painstaking and tireless hours she spent editing this story, providing countless suggestions, and talking me down off of more than one ledge. This fic wouldn't have seen the light of day without her encouragement. If you haven't read her fic *Paragon*, you're missing out.

The story is more-or-less finished at roughly 120k words. I plan to post weekly updates, likely on Fridays (or as my whims dictate).

Prologue

There are dead lights, far away.

They have been out for a millennium or more. But closer to shore, where waves breach land turned black with neglect, a man stands alone.

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

But for now, while he can, the man raises his hand to turn the lights back on.

The Institute for Omegan Welfare

Chapter Summary

Hannibal goes to Will.

In the institute's observatory, Hannibal watches the omegas through the glass partition with a frown.

He can see them, but they can't see him. Still, it's clear they're aware of his presence on the other side of the glass.

There are perhaps one or two dozen of the unfortunate creatures in the room beyond, lounging on threadbare blankets and tattered, mismatched pillows. They talk, pretending for all the world they're doing little more than socializing with their peers. A few of the more eager variety attempt to entice him by stretching their necks in invitation or leaning over cheap folding chairs with legs spread obscenely wide. Their white coveralls appear dingy under the florescent lights.

Hannibal looks away to straighten a shirt cuff. Beside him, Frederick Chilton leans towards the glass with a clipboard clutched to his chest. He smells like cheap cologne and expensive breath mints.

Will Graham must be here.

"Tell me, Dr. Chilton, are there any you'd recommend?"

Frederick turns from the window to rummage through the clipboard. "Yes, well, let's see. You're past middle age, unbonded, have previous experience homing omegas in heat . . . 'prefers no children?'" He glances at Hannibal. "You don't want children? That's what they're *made* for, Dr. Lecter."

"That's what they're capable of," Hannibal says. "Among other things."

Frederick snaps close the pages of the clipboard and brings it back to his chest. The scents of peppermint and plastic lift from him. "I see no difference. You may as well bond with a beta."

"And perhaps I shall. A recommendation, if you would."

"I hardly suspect you'll find an omega in this institute who *doesn't* want children."

"If you don't have a recommendation, so be it."

The natural golden hue of Frederick's irises has darkened to a dusky amber by the time Hannibal meets them. Hannibal can almost *taste* how his indifference rankles the beta; sees it in the way Frederick's mouth thins and how his fingers clutch a little harder at the clipboard.

To Frederick's credit, he holds Hannibal's gaze a moment longer. "In truth, no, there's not one in particular I'd recommend. They are all rather alike in personality and mannerism, are they not?" When Hannibal doesn't respond, Frederick clears his throat. "Yes, well. They are, of course, chipped and marked in accordance with local law. We have their pedigrees to the fifth generation as well as familial medical histories, to the extent they were available. They all know how to cook, clean, entertain, submit to punishment . . ."

Frederick's voice recedes to a pleasant hum of white noise as Hannibal turns back to the glass.

Jack Crawford had sat in Hannibal's office only months ago with his head in his hands. He'd said many things that day, most of them about his protégé, but only two of his words had truly stuck with Hannibal. The words have followed him since, pulsing in his skull with the frenetic drumbeat of an approaching army, unrelenting and unignorable: presented omega.

Presented omega. Presented omega. Presented omega.

Hannibal scans the room a second time and then a third. The eyes that stare back at the one-way glass are in shades of cyan, navy, cerulean, and sky. Their expressions are coy and desperate.

Will Graham must be here, he thinks again as the first slow tendril of unease cracks through the lowest layer of his underbelly.

And then, he stills.

There.

An omega, sitting in a folding chair at a card table with two others. Far in the back corner of the room, furthest from the partition and turned halfway from the glass so a deep shadow obscures most of his face. His companions are among those actively enticing Hannibal's attention. One is leaning over the back of a folding chair, arched sweetly in a breeding lordosis. The other is sucking with some violence on a ballpoint pen.

This particular omega, however, the third omega, just sits. And *glares*.

Hannibal steps toward the glass.

One of those at the table, a blonde female perhaps half Will's age, dips her spine lower, raises her buttocks higher. Will watches her, his expression caught somewhere between concern and exasperation. Until, with the elegance of a temperamental schoolboy, he rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

A flare of challenge coils in Hannibal's gut. He presses an index finger to the glass. "There. The one in the corner, with the brown curls. Tell me about him."

Frederick approaches the partition with a pleased noise that dies almost at once. “Oh, goodness, *no*, Dr. Lecter. No, no, no. Far be it from me to squander an opportunity for love to bloom where it may, but permit me to assure you homing *that one* would be a mistake. He’s far more trouble than he’s worth.”

Presented omega.

Hannibal makes a contemplative noise in the back of his throat.

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Frederick says. “I’m well aware some alphas like a good, old-fashioned challenge. Defiance can be as charming as any other trait, can it not? But hear me when I say Will Graham is a menace. There’s not an ounce of submission in him.”

Hannibal turns his attention to Will. The omega’s eyes are on the blonde female at his table, his brow furrowed. He leans towards her, speaking softly. When she doesn’t respond, doesn’t so much as look at him, he uncrosses his arms and reaches a hand towards her. She snarls, pink lips pulling back over white teeth, so she can spit something out across the table. Unfazed, Will’s wide mouth continues to shape around words Hannibal cannot hear.

“What is he saying?”

“Knowing him?” Frederick sighs. “Likely that she’s more than her omegan instincts and she doesn’t have to present herself as, well, as *charmingly* as she is. Mr. Graham abhors his own gender, the confused thing.”

The blonde leaves. Will’s eyes follow her retreat for a long moment before he lowers them to the table. As Hannibal watches, as saliva pools on his tongue, something shifts in Will’s expression until an aching, lush fury grips the omega’s jaw. With it, soft omegan curves fall to reveal shadowy crevices.

Hannibal scents the air. In the low light of the observatory, he smells only dusty disuse and the plastic reek of Frederick’s cologne. “What does he smell like when angry?”

“Hannibal, seriously, listen to me,” Frederick begins but stops when Hannibal looks at him. He considers Hannibal’s expression, purses his lips, and opens the clipboard to rifle through it. “Fine, fine. If you are quite certain. . . . Though, it *would* be remiss of me not to mention the orderlies have taken to calling Mr. Graham *proditor misericordia*. Or really, just *the proditor*. Some bastardized Latin nonsense they conjured meaning-“

“Traitor,” Hannibal says, “of . . . compassion?”

“Of empathy, sympathy, something like that, yes.”

“But traitor?”

Frederick flips through a few more pages before passing the clipboard to Hannibal. “Read that.”

Hannibal reads.

G.A., beta, custodial staff: When the omega is angry, I'm right back in the Bronx in December, like time travel or virtual reality or something. Right after I'd learned my ex-fiancé had been jumped by some assholes. Raped her, the dogs.

Dr. E.R., alpha, psychiatrist: His sadness brings to mind my husband's funeral. I'm standing right there in the funeral home vestibule all over again. Everywhere I went smelled like white lilies for days, and I can smell it on Mr. Graham, too. I've requested he not be assigned to my rotation.

T.J., omega, resident: He smells like the time I was punished after burning my alpha's birthday cake.

Dr. S.M., beta, psychologist: It depends what the emotion is, of course, but he's always so angry, isn't he? It makes me want to run. When he's calm, I'm kind of aching, like I've been jogging on the treadmill and my muscles are tired.

Hannibal reads the descriptions twice, three times.

"Enhanced abilities," Frederick clips. His tone curls the edges of the words. "Merely a few years ago and we'd have anywhere from ten to fifteen per cent of our long-term residents present with enhanced abilities. Now? Well, now we have the distinct pleasure of Mr. Graham. He's a medical novelty to be sure, though he appears to have absolutely no desire to control his gift. Positively *thrilled* to wreak whatever havoc he might, the damnable cretin."

At the table, Will is leaning back in his chair, his gaze on the ceiling. Everything from his crossed arms to the tight line of his mouth is a bright red beacon signaling his complete and utter contempt for where he is and with whom he's found himself in company. He tugs at the edge of his sleeve to curl it around his fist.

In the observatory, Frederick paws at his own cuffs. "I don't mind telling *you* his refusal to behave himself is nothing more than textbook narcissism, interesting only because it's such a gendered rarity. A shame, really, the poor thing. I doubt he'll ever be bonded."

Hannibal hums.

"He's been trained." Frederick pauses. "Well, we've *tried* training him, anyway. He simply refuses to comply. Do you know, he's been returned to the institute twice while in active heat. Twice. Can you imagine? What alpha returns an omega in *active heat*?"

"That is remarkably unusual."

Together, they watch Will sigh before placing his arms on the table and letting his head fall into them.

"I mean, *really*." Frederick fumbles at the pocket of his trousers, producing a handheld transceiver. "Like a child! He is well aware of your presence and yet-*Matthew!*" he barks into the radio. "Matthew! Would you kindly remind Mr. Graham of his purpose here? We have visiting alphas until at least midday." He pockets the transceiver forcibly before turning to Hannibal with apology.

A door opens at the back of the room housing the omegas and a tall, lean beta in the starched whites of an orderly steps inside. His entrance has an unsettling, cascading effect on the room's inhabitants. Like so many prairie dogs in sight of a lethal predator, the omegas all turn to look at him. The orderly blushes, waves his hands, and within moments the omegas again face the glass.

Hannibal refocuses on Will.

The omega is glowering at the card table as the orderly approaches, a thumbnail between his teeth. Though the orderly does little more than touch one of Will's shoulders, there's real violence in the way Will twists away from him. Pleasure unfurls in Hannibal's chest as Will stands to stalk the beta. The omegas nearest them scatter.

The orderly points at the glass partition, the rear door to the room, and then at Will. Will pauses, his teeth bared. They stare at each other for a long moment until the orderly offers a tentative smile. Will crosses his arms back over his chest, though his lips turn down in a wry grin of his own.

Frederick flicks his hand at the window. "Mr. Graham is an emotional mess, as you can see. I mean, goodness, how *do* you train an omega who presents in his thirties?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Yes, so you see--"

"I'm afraid I will have to disappoint you, Dr. Chilton," Hannibal says. "I do rather enjoy -- how did you put it -- a good old-fashioned challenge."

Frederick sighs.

* * * * *

Will doesn't need Matthew to say anything.

He knows another alpha has chosen him by the cool, level gaze Matthew throws him as he enters Will's bedroom. In the little green book he places with apologetic fingers on to the top of Will's dresser. The way his dark gold eyes scan the bare interior of the room as though still unsure if Will owns anything worth packing.

"Just read the table of contents, okay?"

Will sits on his bed and nods but looks at his hands. He often sits like this, aware of the white walls and white floors and how the white cloth of the institute's coveralls shields everything above his wrists. Marveling at how the rustic pink of his skin is the darkest thing in any direction.

"Maybe it'll be better this time," Matthew says, standing partially in the room and partially in the corridor. He gives Will a crooked smile. "I ran into Rebecca last week. You remember Rebecca? She's getting married, you know, to an alpha who found her here. Seems real happy. Could be you this time, who knows?"

Will knows his hands aren't any different since he presented, not really. They're paler, of course, and a little softer. His fingertips are no longer dotted with red pinpricks evidencing the fervent but clumsy hours he's spent tying fishing lures. The peeling callouses at his knuckles that used to follow him like the devil each winter have healed to the point he can no longer find their former edges. The institute keeps him better fed and better exercised than he'd kept himself alone.

But still, his hands look like betrayal. Except at night, when they look like ash.

"So, it's not . . ." Will swallows. "It's not someone I know, then? The alpha, I mean?"

When Matthew hesitates, Will opens the back of his throat and inhales. He lets the scents stirring around the beta gather on his tongue: approaching storm clouds, the briny tang of the sea, embalming fluid, and something tacky and obnoxious like over-sweetened molasses.

He catalogues the emotions as he identifies them. *Sympathetic sadness. Frustration. Anxiety.* And, humming just below the surface, a small, light current of something acidic that stings his nose. *Jealousy.*

Marked, identified, coalesced, the scents say: *Sorry, Will, it's not Mason.*

Will raises his eyes to Matthew's chin. He curls one side of his mouth into a smile, forgiving Matthew for the bad news. In response, the scent of an approaching storm gives way to the honeysuckles and lilacs of *relief*.

Matthew's shoulders twitch, no more than the flex of muscle at his neck suggesting a shrug. It says: *No problem, Will.*

"But hey, guess what?" Matthew taps the green book on top of the dresser, his voice a little more cheery. "I got Mason's address for you, from his file. Already wrote it in the book. So even if he doesn't call, you're all set."

Gratitude swells in Will and he lets it spill into the room. Matthew's return smile is a soft, sweet *you're welcome*.

When Matthew's attention strays back to the book, Will tenses for what comes next. The scents Matthew will release, the way Will always avoids addressing them head-on. Their flimsy little tête-à-tête that has and always will reek of desperation from them both though for entirely different reasons.

Matthew will surround them in orange blossoms, leather, and clean sweat (a little *proud*, much more *ashamed*) and say he's closer than he was the last time Will was homed. He'll say it as he opens the book and writes a dollar amount near the top of the inside cover, *need* and *frantic longing* cutting clean lines across the room. They'll spear right through Will, though he expects them now and no longer flinches. Matthew will stand at the entrance to the room just as he is, not quite willing to leave. Unsure if Will wants him to stay.

Neither of them will mention Matthew isn't an alpha. That he could come to Chilton laden with half the royal jewels and he'd be no closer to homing Will than the meager sums he

writes in the back of the book. Neither will say he's not clever enough to smuggle Will out. Will just barley avoids screaming that *it doesn't matter anyway*. He's not *supposed* to be here, suffocated by white-on-white-on-white, when the life he so carefully built already exists out *there*.

He feels the urge to scream perch in his sternum.

Will detects the first notes of *concern* as Matthew finally speaks. "Will--"

"You'll call, right?" Will asks, closing his eyes. He swallows the scream with effort. "If you hear from Mason or Randall?"

"Course I will."

Will can't see Matthew's face behind his closed eyelids but imagines he's smiling.

When Matthew finally leaves and the last of his scents die from the room, Will grabs the book from the dresser. *The Bountiful Duty* is scrawled in a flowing golden script across its faux leather front. Below it, the stamped outline of *Baltimore State Institute for Omegan Welfare* gleams in a color far too dark for the forest green cover. He sits back down on the bed.

There had been Nicholas, the first alpha to find him here.

There had been Anthony.

Randall.

There had been . . . a woman. Two women. Will can't remember their names.

There had been Beverly, too, of course, who'd enlisted Price to aid her in squirreling Will out on a grounds pass for an evening. They hadn't gone farther than the parking lot, Beverly's good will extending only as far as it kept her from getting arrested. Still, it had been a blissful whiskey- and pizza-infused few hours, lying on the hood of Beverly's car, double-fisting food and drink. The electronic cry of the cicadas had been much too loud for the chilly air. Will had taken great lungfuls of it anyway and longed for the Louisiana bayou.

There had been Mason.

There had been others.

There had been Matthew, too, those times Will had been returned to the institute mid-heat, his body and mind drowning in need and his skin on fire.

On his bed, Will presses his chin to his chest.

The potency of his heats unnerves him. His *emotional projections* are so terrifyingly vivid that Chilton had ordered every alpha to clear the grounds and stay away for the remainder of his last heat. And so, they had sent Matthew. Calm, kind, somewhat dull-witted Matthew who'd always fared Will's emotionality with the implacable fortitude of a boulder. And

really, the beta had been so sweet when he'd come to Will's room. The smile he'd given Will as he'd closed the door had been so kind. So soft.

Matthew had only been sent to check on him, of course. To calm him, should it come to that. But Will had been suffocated by desire, and before either he or Matthew knew what was happening, Matthew's erection was straining through the front of his uniform and his soft smile and soft words had been coupled by soft, aching fingers-

A group of omegas pause as they pass Will's bedroom. Will winces and clutches the book to his lap.

"Sorry," he mumbles as glossy, detached expressions settle on their faces. The male omega among them presses his palm to his groin.

Will waits with his head bowed and his eyes on their feet. Shame and fury writhe in his stomach. He waits for the omegas to scoff or laugh or – *god, please, no* – shoot him pitying looks he doesn't deserve and would sneer at anyway.

"No harm in rubbing one out, Will," the male says as the group collects itself and continues down the hallway.

When they're out of earshot and Will can't hear anyone else coming, he hops off the bed to shut the door. He plucks at the coveralls tented between his legs.

Back on the bed, he tries to read the table of contents but stops halfway through the first page when *What to Expect the First Night* sends a ripple of goosebumps up his forearms. He flips through the remaining pages instead, catching snippets of chapter and subchapter titles as they appear.

Chapter 4: Being a Good Housekeeper.

Part 6: Tending to Emotional Needs.

Part 10: The Science of Getting Along.

Chapter 17: The Importance of Omegan Friends.

He turns to the inside of the back cover. Six names and five addresses are written there in his cramped, messy hand. Four of each are blotted beyond recognition. In Matthew's looping scrawl is the final address, fresh and slightly smeared in his haste to return the book to Will.

Mason Verger, 1 Quarry Road, Havre de Grace, MD.

Will runs a finger across the words. The ink flashes under the overhead lights.

He tips the book forward. Two yellow pills Matthew has thoughtfully tucked between the pages drop into his hand. He swallows them dry.

* * * * *

Frederick's office is offensively gauche.

Behind the archaic desk much too large for the room hangs a series of diplomas and certificates in mismatched craft-store frames. Hannibal sits in an unfortunate avocado-green leather wingback. From it, he can identify Curacao and Barbados among the good doctor's educators.

Otherwise, the room contains only one other notable piece of furniture – an austere bookshelf tucked in its furthest corner. It's haphazard with storage boxes and a small handful of reference manuals. *The Physician's Guide to Alphas, Betas, and Omegas. Cognitive Dissonance in the Misgendered. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.* The last of which is still wrapped in dusty cellophane.

Frederick watches Hannibal's assessment of his office in silence. The chair behind the desk is far too low, as though wilting in apology for being included among what Frederick considers his finest professional offerings. Above it, an inexcusably small slash of his chest is visible. Hannibal imagines if he taps a fingernail to the desk, the hollow thump of particle board would tap back.

He leans forward intending to do just that but stops when a beta enters the room.

"Ah, yes, Dr. Bloom," Frederick says. He rises from the desk. "Thank you for coming. I wasn't sure if you had left for the day."

Alana ignores Frederick's outstretched hand. Her red peacoat brings with it the crisp, decayed scent of fresh snow.

She's changed very little in the years since Hannibal had last seen her; as pretty and severe in Frederick's dreary office as she was a Ph.D. candidate under Hannibal's tutelage at Johns Hopkins. She's still bargain-bin fashionable and still in heels far too impractical for everyday wear. Heels which he's certain will echo with the definitive *clack, clack* favored by certain beta women in positions of power.

The only evidence of the passing years is a single deep wrinkle to the side of her formerly soft mouth. As she looks at Frederick, her lips move to press the wrinkle deeper. "*Will Graham*, Frederick? How could you be so careless?"

"How could *I*?" He glances at Hannibal. "Yes, yes, point made. I should have called you immediately, of course. I assume Matthew tracked you down?" Without waiting for a response, he flicks a hand towards Hannibal and slumps back behind his desk. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

"*Hannibal*," Alana says, taking long strides across the room towards him. *Clack, clack, clack.* He rises to embrace her. "My God, it's been far too long. We must have dinner soon."

"Nothing would delight me more."

Movement behind Alana's shoulder catches Hannibal's eye. There, standing someway back from the open office door, is the lean beta orderly. Hannibal returns his tepid stare with

interest. By the time Alana is pulling away and patting Hannibal's arm affectionately, the orderly has nodded once, given Hannibal an equally tepid smile, and moved on down the corridor.

"Unfortunate indeed," Frederick says. He eyes Alana as she sits in an identically horrible wingback beside Hannibal. "How nice you two are already acquainted. It will make this conversation easier."

Hannibal crosses his legs. "And what conversation might that be?"

To his delight, Alana and Frederick stare at each other for a long moment across the remarkable width of Frederick's desk.

Finally, Frederick sighs. "I tried to dissuade him. What else could I do?"

Alana's expression is so reminiscent of *L'Absinthe* that Hannibal almost smiles. It, too, reminds him of the last time he saw Jack Crawford. The alpha had spent their entire session in silence, spinning a pork pie hat between his thick fingers. The red-black hue of his irises had darkened to coal as he'd focused on a spot somewhere between his shoes and Hannibal's.

Hannibal has indulged many evenings since, a glass of wine in one hand and his sketchbook open on his lap, recreating Jack's harrowed expression as he'd left the office. The way Jack had said, "Will, I-I think he's dangerous," to the wintry Baltimore skyline always forcing Hannibal's hand harder against the page.

The urge to sketch jumps in his fingers.

Alana sighs. "This conversation is the one where we warn you that the institute does not, under any circumstance, condone the use of corporal punishment as a means of corrective action."

Hannibal doesn't miss the dry, downward curve of her bottom lip when he says, "I'm well aware corporal punishment was outlawed by the Omegan Welfare Protection Act."

"I believe you wrote that bit of legislation yourself."

"So I did."

Frederick straightens a little, holding himself chest-forward in a way that reminds Hannibal forcibly of a pufferfish. "As director of this institute, I am both legally and ethically obligated to inform you that our official position, confirmed by not one but *three* independent medical examiners, is that Will Graham is not recommended for homing."

Hannibal looks at Alana. "I assume spaying and rehoming Will in a gender-neutral facility is an unsatisfactory solution in light of his enhanced abilities?"

To Hannibal's surprise, neither beta flinches at the suggestion. Instead, Alana's blackberry scent turns sour and Frederick's expression tips towards smug.

Frederick flips through a few pages of the clipboard before pushing it toward Hannibal. “As it happens, Dr. Bloom and I disagree on that particular point. Perhaps a tiebreaker is necessary.”

Hannibal takes the clipboard. For his own amusement, he says, “It may be that the most appropriate solution, if not the kindest, is to supply Will with the suppressants he needs to continue living as the beta male he believed he was.”

Silence falls sweetly. Hannibal looks down at the clipboard, open to a photograph of a man’s bare torso, and suppresses a smile. He’s never taken an interest in photography, having long preferred the influence of his own hand in graphite and ink, acrylic and watercolor.

Nevertheless, it would take a far duller eye than his to know the photographer’s skill leaves much to be desired. The aperture is much too low for the proximity of the subject, the overhead lighting too dim. In their messy wake is clean, pale skin washed out almost entirely by flash.

Still, what remains makes him pause.

It’s a *symphony* of colors. Broad strokes of furious red and melancholic green, a quick slash of burnt umber, a scribble of cherry pie. Blended and pressed and perfected to form bruises, teeth marks, scratches, rips. Hannibal’s fingers flex with the impulse to dip into blood not quite clotted and *taste*.

He touches a particularly brutal imprint of teeth along the subject’s collarbone. Looking at Frederick to ensure the beta’s face gives nothing away, he asks, “Will was bitten?”

“He *bit*,” Frederick snaps. “Fear not, Dr. Lecter, he was not bitten back.”

Hannibal refocuses on the photo. On the damage *Will* inflicted.

Novelty.

His tongue feels tight in his mouth.

Will Graham is a novelty.

He’d known this already, of course, to some lesser extent. Jack has spent hours in Hannibal’s office fretting about Will Graham. It’s far from happenstance that of all the possible omegas residing in all the possible institutes, Hannibal is *here* in search of *Will*. He’d known the omega’s special brand of deductive reasoning was interesting. His empathy fascinating.

But *this*. A veritable predator in omegan skin?

It’s almost too much.

Hannibal stares at the photograph for a moment longer, unsure of what his face might reveal. When he finally lifts his head, he must catch a pleasurable sigh behind his teeth.

His world is once again subsumed with light.

His eyes rake across the room, absorbing as much as they can. The sun rays filling the room are a little brighter than they had been a moment before. The mottled brown and tan lines spread across Frederick's monstrous desk are a little lighter. The red in Alana's peacoat a little richer.

The yearning behind Hannibal's breastbone cracks open to spill desire and the need to *possess* the omega, to *devour* him deep into his torso. He soaks it up and thinks it tastes like spring in Moldova.

His smile is a little more genuine when he says, "I couldn't say whether a gender-neutral facility is the best option for Will. What I do know, however, is that I'd very much like to meet him."

* * * * *

With misgivings, with reassurances, Hannibal is escorted to a conference room near the front entrance of the institute. The decaying scent of snow grows as they move down the corridor.

Clack, clack, clack.

Alana grabs his arm at the conference room door. "Hannibal, listen."

There's a tense silence as the doctors look at each other until, with a huff, Frederick swings the door open and lets himself inside. Hannibal watches him approach the table in the windowless room, his head held at an obnoxious tilt before the door swings shut behind him.

"However Frederick Chilton of all people managed to obtain this position-" Hannibal begins but stops when Alana squeezes his arm.

Her expression compels him towards a smile, though he knows better than to indulge it. She's always been such a sensitive and warm-blooded creature, his sweet Alana Bloom. All these years later, she must still wield her good nature like a horse's whip, battering those within her particular circle of the universe to submit to her worldview. The severity of her look means that he, too, will be serious for this conversation.

So, he doesn't smile. Instead, he pushes his eyebrows together in a mimicry of her expression. "Alana?"

"The last alpha that homed Will was a collector."

Hannibal frowns.

"We didn't know, of course, and Will seems to have taken the whole thing just fine. He wasn't there that long." She returns Hannibal's frown, the wrinkle at her mouth frowning with her. "But he's been . . . odd since he returned. Keeps asking if the alpha has called."

"Was the alpha arrested?"

"He was. Will was one of about two dozen omegas found on the property, all with enhanced abilities. It was an open-and-shut case." She waves her hand at his obvious interest, as she

has always waved away all that is fascinating but ultimately irrelevant. “That’s just it. I don’t think Will *fears* the alpha returning. I think he’s hopeful for it.”

“Trauma bonding?”

Alana shakes her head. “I’m only saying what I’m about to say to *you*, specifically, because you know I have good instincts.” Horse whip firmly in hand, without waiting for a response, she says, “I’ve known Will for a very long time. Years. I *know* him, Hannibal.”

Jealousy and distaste flood Hannibal’s mouth. He nods to loosen the tension in his neck, his eyes skimming her face – *brows furrowed, frown small, cheeks pinched* – and recalibrates his expression to match.

She softens at once. “Will isn’t interested in the alpha as a mate. Will doesn’t . . . he’s not great at forming emotionally intimate relationships with people.” She leans in a little closer, lowering her voice into the empty hallway. “Look, I can’t prove it, but I know what he’s doing right now. He’s waiting for the alpha to make a move.”

Will, I-I think he’s dangerous.

“The alpha is awaiting trial, presumably on house arrest?” Hannibal asks. Alana nods. “It may be that Will is simply waiting for the alpha to begin collecting again. I imagine he’ll contact Jack Crawford the moment the alpha attempts to reacquire him.”

Alana’s wrinkle reappears.

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal says. A sudden thrill taps against his throat. “What is it you anticipate Will doing, exactly?”

She waves her hand at him again, dispersing the question and the conversation with it. “I don’t know. But I have a news alert set up for the alpha’s name, just in case. It would help me sleep at night if you did, too.” She exhales heavily as Hannibal retrieves his phone. “Mason Verger.”

“Of the meat packing dynasty?”

“The same.”

Hannibal sets the alert and pockets his phone. “If I’m not mistaken, Mr. Verger has an omegan twin sister.”

Alana is already turning to the door, worldview established, horse whip tucked away. “I have no idea.”

She opens the door, and he catches it by one edge to hold it open for them both. “Do you remember that injured bird you found at Johns Hopkins?”

“Which one?”

At that, he does smile.

Alana makes her way to the utilitarian steel table in the middle of the room. Frederick is seated on one side, facing the door, a cell phone between his hands. He doesn't bother to look up as Alana sits beside him. Hannibal assesses the available seating – two additional chairs facing away from the door – and grabs one by its arched back. He drags it to the other side of the table, relishing the high-pitched shriek its legs make against the linoleum floor. Neither beta pays him or the noise any mind.

He sits, leaning back in his chair with a serene smile.

When Will enters the conference room a few minutes later, one of his elbows gripped by the lean beta orderly, Hannibal's first thought is, *he's drugged*. It's followed by, *the orderly drugged him* as the beta's dark gold eyes skip between the faces of the three doctors before him.

Whatever drug the orderly administered has a marked effect on Will's motor control. It's not without effort that he turns his head to Hannibal a few steps into the room. As though on a tether, the orderly looks at him, too. When Will nods, the orderly sighs.

Hannibal cocks his head.

"Mr. Graham was nervous," the orderly says, smiling at Will. "I gave him a little something to calm him down and it kicked him in the teeth a bit, dinnit, Will?"

"Yes, yes, that's fine, Matthew," Frederick says as Will all but falls into the remaining chair at the conference table. "Thank you."

"This chair is terrible," Will says with an exaggerated wince. "Who chose it?"

Now that Hannibal is so close to Will, now that he can properly absorb the creature that's consumed his thoughts for months, he permits himself a moment to savor.

There is a cracked, delicate beauty to Will's face. It holds little of the androgyny typical of his gender; the planes of his chin and jaw are decidedly masculine, even hidden as they are under dark stubble. His lips are thin, wide, and chapped, nose canted a little to one side in a way that suggests it's been broken and inexpertly reset. Eyebrows and hair thick. All of it clean and unkempt.

Still, there's a softness to the lines of Will's face. A fragility that lingers under the skin. A hint of something malleable that Hannibal might capture between his fingers. That beckons him to press the pad of his thumb under one of Will's eyes and shatter the bone beneath.

Presented omega.

He asks, "Does the institute often sedate Will?"

Will, who's smiling at Alana in a sloppy way, narrows his eyes before turning his head to Hannibal.

"Of course not," Frederick says. "And I'd hardly call him *sedated*, goodness, Dr. Lecter. Matthew, what did you give him?"

“The little blue diamonds,” Matthew says, holding his index finger and thumb a little apart to peer through the small space. “You know, the ones we give some of ‘em when they first get here.”

Will snorts, his eyes still narrowed on Hannibal. He bites at a thumbnail.

“This is alarming,” Alana says quietly. “I find it very difficult to imagine the doctor on staff-“

“S’not Matthew’s fault,” Will says, rolling his head back to her. He makes an effort to sit higher in the chair but abandons it with another wince. “Let it be.”

“We will, of course, have to revise our procedures immediately,” Frederick says. He points at the orderly. “And I expect you in my office at 9:00 a.m. sharp tomorrow. Bring a union representative with you.”

“A union rep-he was trying to *help*,” Will says. He shifts himself upright. “*Christ*, who picked these chairs?”

Frederick leans over the table to catch Hannibal’s eye.

“Just listen, would you?” Will says. A delicate flush blossoms at his throat and spreads quickly to his jawline. “I had the pills from the last time I got back. From the-my last heat. Matthew didn’t do anything, okay? Maybe he didn’t check my room well enough, but since I’ve had the pills for a week now, none of the other orderlies did either, so . . .” Will claps his hands. “Absolved.”

Frederick says, “Whatever affections you two might have-“

Will’s light blush deepens to a garnet fury. “Exactly what part of ‘I hoarded the pills myself’ isn’t computing? *Take a second to just shut up and listen.*”

The scents come at once, overwhelming the small room. *Burning paper, burning wood, fire.* Hannibal looks across the barren walls, to the vents running along the grimy floor, the space under the door, the trashcan next to it, but sees neither fire nor smoke. Next to him, Frederick and Alana have their eyes closed, their mouths and brows twisted by discomfort.

When he looks at Will, the omega is already staring at him. As is Matthew who, despite the tightness around his eyes, places a soft hand on Will’s shoulder. Just like that, as quickly as they’d arrived, the scents evaporate.

“Sorry,” Will says, his eyes on Hannibal. “That was me. Just give me a second.” He looks at Alana. “And, you know, sorry for whatever got drudged up. Again.”

Hannibal bares his teeth in a smile. “The proditor, indeed.”

Both Will and the orderly frown.

Presented omega.

The words burn acreage under Hannibal's skin. It had taken considerable self-control not to immediately declare his intentions for Will when the words had left Jack's mouth. And he knows as he watches Will remove a piece of fingernail and spit it across the table, his eyes scanning Hannibal's face, that it will take significantly more to willingly loose Will Graham from his clutches now.

It may be a day, a week, or a month before the colors infused into the world by this novelty *du jour* begin to drain. He'll look up from a sketch at his drafting table to find a little more gray than had existed moments before. Or he'll leave his office after a long day to find a dull sheen has settled like a film over the world around him. Food will be a little blander, conversation a little duller. And when it is, he'll start his hunt anew. For the interesting. The unique. The stunning.

But for now, while the electric blue of the omega's irises is as captivating as it is, Hannibal will enjoy extracting what novel pieces from Will he can, to frame and display alongside the rest.

Until the gray returns, Will Graham is *his*.

Across the table, Will's frown deepens.

The Manor

Chapter Summary

Hannibal takes Will home.

Will falls asleep on the drive home from the institute. Hannibal, content to stare without apology or excuse, lets him settle without comment.

He's enlisted his occasional chauffeur for the journey home, besotted by the thought he might make the trip in the company of a brooding, sneering, *omegan* Will Graham.

He's imagined sitting in the backseat just as he is now, listening to sweet whines and little chirruping noises falling from Will's otherwise disdainful mouth.

A mouth that, not long ago, had held a shadow of that disdain as Will avoided looking directly at a reporter's camera.

He'd been standing on the outskirts of a crime scene, and the chapped, pink bow of his mouth had opened to declare the brutal carnage within *remarkable*.

Beautiful.

Masterful.

"I-we, we've never seen anything like it," Will had said to the reporter. The way he'd kept his head turned and his face low, Hannibal couldn't see his eyes; couldn't have said whether Will's pupils dilated or shrank when he'd said, "We probably never will again."

In the backseat of Hannibal's car, Will gives an abrupt snore that startles him briefly awake. He rubs the cheek planted against the window before letting his head drop back against the headrest. One brown curl falls across Hannibal's fingers where they lie open on the tops of the seats. He presses the silken hair between the pads of his thumb and index finger, massaging the spiral with delicacy, careful not to alert Will to his touch.

Hannibal inhales through his mouth to coat it in the omega's scent. *Sticky sweet amber, honey, charcoal, camphor*. Without his permission, he feels his lips part and his tongue press hard against the inside of his teeth.

That particular tableau had been an act closer to whimsy than Hannibal had ever experienced. It'd come on the heels of a run-of-the-mill culmination of bad luck: a ruined shirt from the dry cleaners, a small leak in the beer barrel fermenting in his garage, a case of wine that had only *just* arrived in time for a dinner party. He'd already been dressed for the evening, the

case heavy in his arms as he walked back to his car. A thin, pallid man had hopped across a sidewalk to avoid a puddle and set himself directly in Hannibal's path.

A collision. Broken bottles. *Six* broken bottles.

To the fizzy, popping mess of the bottles' innards, the man had berated Hannibal for not watching his step. Hannibal had displayed the man's innards in a similar fashion.

Remarkable. Beautiful. Masterful.

Will, I-I think he's dangerous.

A clip of Will's interview is saved on Hannibal's phone. Passed in the nature of all worthy heirlooms from phone to phone since it first aired. He's watched it hundreds, thousands of times and spends just as much time *not* watching it, fascinated and yearning for the fevered withdrawal that taps at his bones when he goes too long without it. The thirst and hunger, the tremors at his hands, the quivering, aching, burning *need* that rises in him like a herald until *there*, there it is playing again and finally, he can rest.

He will watch and not watch it a thousand times more.

Five years have passed since the video, recorded two decades after he'd first stepped foot in America. Italy, his medical license, and *Il Mostro* now tucked deep in the hidden enclaves of his memory instead of the daily air he breathes. And Will, the stunning thing, had been correct. The FBI hasn't seen anything like it. Nor are they likely to again.

After all, Hannibal intends to keep his current professional license.

"Congratulations, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal meets the chauffeur's small, dark eyes in the rearview mirror.

"He's quite pretty, isn't he?" the chauffeur continues. "Quite pretty."

Hannibal intends to hum an appreciative noise but finds, to his delight, that it catches fire and smolders in his throat.

Well, well, would you look at that. He smiles at the uneasy tension that coils around his gut like piano wire, fighting a sudden and all-encompassing urge to throw his overcoat across Will to shield him from view and, with luck, from further thick-browed insights from the chauffeur.

He quashes the urge.

To his charmed dismay, he spends the rest of the drive with a fist tight on Will's curl and his eyes on the rearview mirror, taunting, begging, *pleading* with the driver to look anywhere but at the gray stretch of asphalt before him. His muscles coil and contract, prepared to pounce.

When they arrive home, Hannibal steps out of the car and towards Will's door. He leans far enough into the backseat to place his palm against the side of Will's face. For a moment, the

omega's brows unfurl and he presses his cheek into Hannibal's hand with a sweet, soft sigh. But before Hannibal can fully appreciate the flood of warmth that riots up his arm at the sound, Will's eyes fly open. He jerks away, cracking his skull on the coat hook.

"Ah," he snarls, grabbing the side of his head. "*Jesus*, what the hell."

Hannibal pulls himself erect and readjusts his gloves. "We're home. It's time to come inside."

Will inhales and then freezes. He looks out of the open door and across the dim driveway shrouded in the setting sun, to the wide expanse of sand-colored brick and wrought iron accoutrements.

Hannibal follows his gaze. Plants potted in ornate shale vases line the walkway. Flowering abutilons and fetterbushes, as his gardener had insisted with a vehemence bordering on obscene. They are beautiful, draping things in the warmer months, though Hannibal dislikes the scent of both. Now though, in the clutch of winter, they are spindled and bare.

"Right," Will says, his eyes on the dead plants. "Yeah, okay."

He follows Hannibal to the front door, waiting at the far side of the porch with his hands shoved into his pockets and his shoulders curled around his ears. Inside, he glances around the foyer. "S' nice," he mumbles. "What do you do?"

The piano wire tightens in Hannibal's gut. "I'm a psychiatrist in private practice. Although I consult for the FBI now and again, when called upon. I'm certain Jack Crawford has mentioned me."

Will nods absently, his eyes still skipping around the foyer. "So, this is Jack's doing?"

Hannibal turns to remove his shoes when the first notes of wet foliage and the hot, heavy press of ozone rise from the omega's skin. He doffs his coat and scarf and hangs them on a limb of the nearby coatrack. "Jack's doing?"

"Sure."

When Hannibal turns back to Will, he finds the omega has taken the opportunity to draw near.

Hannibal blinks away his surprise before it can settle on his face. But the omega's *brazenness* – and really, there's no other word for it – in encroaching on Hannibal's space is enough to draw his instincts, typically dormant and docile, to the surface.

They jostle against each other, vying for his attention. Around the cacophony of words (*such insolence, make him behave, Hannibal, you must, you must, you must!*) there's a sweet, sticky pleasure dripping into his marrow. His instincts may be riotous in the face of a poorly behaved omega, but Hannibal himself most certainly is not.

His smile is soft and easy. "Do you wish to scent me, Will?"

Will lifts his head. His eyes are the shocking, aching blue typical of his gender. But what gives Hannibal pause, what makes his dick twitch and intrigue spread like wildfire under his skin, is the fine line of beta-gold that rims them – the merest hint Will doesn't run in a vein entirely submissive. The color calls to Hannibal the way mice call to hawks.

Reverence tugs at the piano wire as Will continues to stare.

One of Hannibal's louder instincts shimmies to the surface. It opens its fat mouth to bellow, *Look at how he stares! The audacity! You must punish him at once!*

It's far too easy for Hannibal to imagine the bone-deep pleasure he'll feel if he caves to the demand. If he takes Will by the back of his neck and forces his head down until the omega must bend, must *submit* or risk snapping a disc. The noise the omega would make – a terrified, trilling whine – sends a bolt of desire straight through him.

His instincts are back in a frenzy at the thought, demanding he show the omega to whose whims that lithe body should bend.

The pliable, cracking, *breakable* thing Will is.

There must be something of Hannibal's thoughts on his face because Will flinches. Still, he doesn't move. Doesn't step back or duck his head. Doesn't whine or blush or collapse in a scented mess of apology and submission. He doesn't give an inch, though something small and mischievous rolls across his face.

He wants to know where the line is, one of Hannibal's more rational instincts offers. *Wants to know what kind of alpha you are.*

That decides it. With a quick step, Hannibal bridges the already small space between them, pleased when Will's eyes fly open wide. The tangy smell of his mild distress quickly gives way to something more loamy, like plants and animal musk. *Fear*: Blue encases gold completely.

Will's gaze darts around Hannibal's face, from brow to cheek to mouth. Hannibal closes his eyes, puts his hands in his pockets, and lifts his head high and away to expose his throat.

Will moves at once, running the tip of his nose across the hollow between Hannibal's collarbone and jaw. After a few snuffling sounds, Will steps back. By the time Hannibal opens his eyes, Will is again staring at the floor.

Hannibal preens at the omega's easy deference. It's a stunning thing indeed, close as it is to the defiance Will wears like a second skin. Thin, transparent, but tangible. Hannibal has no desire to stomp out either. Their combination is, after all, yet another unexpected novelty he will extract from the omega and frame alongside the rest.

"It is not enough to know if I am in the house, but whether I might be nearby. Enemies closer after all," Hannibal says. "Only, of course, if you believe Jack Crawford and I have conspired to keep tabs on you."

Will shrugs. "Pretty big coincidence."

"Baltimore's not that big a city."

The omega huffs a small, dry laugh to the rug at his feet.

A good old-fashioned challenge, indeed.

Despite already looking away from Hannibal, Will dips his head further when Hannibal smiles.

"I must say, Will, I cannot help but wonder. What do I smell like to you?"

Will shrugs again. He digs his closed fists further into his pockets.

"You're certainly under no obligation to tell me, of course, though I admit--"

"Like anger," Will snaps, his voice is a little too loud. A little more of his teeth show than is strictly polite. "But I can tell you're not angry. So . . . so, I'm not sure."

"And what does anger smell like to you?"

The omega opens his mouth, closes it. He frowns at the floor. "Like . . . like heat, I guess. But not really. A consumption. Chaos. Falling down a deep pit. Doing something and knowing halfway through you can't stop or turn back."

Hannibal stills. Only when Will's frown deepens does Hannibal smooth down the front of his suit jacket to cover his surprise. Carefully, he says, "Chaos. Consumption. These are identifiable by scent?"

"Sure, like anything else."

Hannibal hums. "It would not surprise me to learn the smell is intrinsically connected with some memories you have. Some unhappy ones. Or, more likely, a very specific memory that has defined that emotion for you above all others."

"Yeah, doctor. Sure."

Hannibal steps through the foyer and into the kitchen. He retrieves a key from his pocket and places it on the island. "Up the first flight of stairs, turn right, and continue until you reach the last door. There are three connecting rooms. A den, a bedroom, and a bathroom. They're all yours, to come and go as you please. Feel free to lock it behind you. There are no additional keys."

He hears Will take the key from the island, inhale slowly, and then pause.

Hannibal withdraws a skillet from the rack above the kitchen island, his back to Will. "Dinner will be ready in an hour. Please join me then."

* * * * *

Will sits on the leather ottoman in front of the bed and stares at his hands. The medication Matthew gave him is still lingering under his skin. He can see it in the way his hands blur and shift as he looks at them, in how he tries and fails to count the number of drawers on the nearby dresser.

He falls back onto the bed with a sigh.

His head is stuffed full of noises.

Instincts.

That first week at the institute, he'd lost days that felt like years trying to hear and respond to their chorus of demands and seemingly arbitrary instructions. Too many nights of too little sleep had passed before he learned that if he gave in just a little, if he capitulated every now and then, the voices all burrowed down into murky silence. For a time.

They're loud now, though pleasant enough. They demand that he take a moment to indulge in how soft the bed's duvet will feel against his bare skin. They're probably right, the damnable things. They usually are. Still, he fights the urge for a long moment, until another instinct pops its head from the gloom. It has a slyness to it that Will doesn't like at all. Before it can clear murky water from its teeth, Will rolls the sleeves and pant legs of the institute's coveralls as high as they'll go to run his bared flesh against the duvet.

The noises fade as he stretches and spreads far across the mattress, gratified when neither his fingers nor toes reach its edges.

Big, comfortable, safe. Soft, soft, soft.

He stills when a purr perches in this throat, threatening to spill into noise.

He presses forward on the mattress with his toes until his head and an arm fall over one side. From there, he can see into the bedroom's walk-in closet. A small handful of shirts and slacks hang on wooden hangers. Chances are, they're all made of omega-friendly fabrics. All in neutral, earthy, omega-friendly colors. He doesn't need to move any closer to know they'll likely be too small.

His gaze drifts. There's a floor-length mirror turned sideways over a low, wide dresser. An overstuffed leather chair and a matching ottoman. A black metal lamp. A normal bedroom, decorated in the same vaguely threatening opulence as the rest of the house. An aesthetic entirely lost on him and ruined, like all homes owned by single alphas, by the capsaicin-burn scent of its owner.

He rolls onto his back. From within a pocket of his jacket, he removes a small bundle of personal possessions. He has only a handful of things, all of which fit with room to spare in a single plastic grocery bag: some extra socks and underwear, an identification card, and his personal copy of *The Bountiful Duty*.

From a separate pocket, he fishes out a small flip phone and charging cable. The phone, like the ones before it, had been hard won, mostly by Matthew. He'll need to find a good place to

hide it. For now, he stashes it between the mattress and the bedspring.

He opens the little green book to stare at the inside of the back cover. Images of him tearing it off with his teeth and chewing it to pulp or drowning it in the nearest toilet batter against his skull. Instead of doing either, he lays the book down next to him, his fingers spread open and protective across it.

He dares not look at his hands.

He hopes Matthew hasn't been fired.

* * * * *

Jack once mentioned Will was from the south.

He hadn't elaborated and Hannibal hadn't asked for more, but he'd managed to glean other tidbits from their appointments. In the end, Hannibal's educated guess had been the deep south, possibly Mississippi due solely to a passing reference Jack once made to Biloxi. As he reads snippets of Will's file from the institute while preparing dinner, he sees he'd been close. Louisiana is indeed the deep south.

The file is unusually thick. On Hannibal's other trips home from the institute, an omega on the brink of heat tucked against him in the backseat of his car, he'd sorted through each lean file with relative ease. Skimming the contents with half an eye, an interesting fact or anecdote plucked from the pages to be offered like ripened fruit at his leisure.

This file, however, Will's file, reads more like a register of misconduct than it does anything else.

On the front is a large mailing label on which REMEMBER TO REGISTER YOUR OMEGA is printed in bolded, inch-high script. Next to it is a citation to the Omegan Welfare Protection Act. Below, the address for a website and the serial number for the homing chip the institute implants in each of its brood.

Hannibal ignores it all and turns to the first page.

Alpha mother, beta father, only child.

He withdraws a stock pot from a cupboard and sets it at the sink to fill. He pulls the lid off the small cooler of crawfish he'd purchased earlier that day to look inside. Most of the specimens appear fatigued in their makeshift freshwater stew. Three or four are belly-up. He fishes them out to discard in the trashcan.

New Orleans, multiple low-wage jobs (e.g., boat motor mechanic). Omnivorous, prefers whiskies (n.b., is known to drink to excess). When asked to answer standard questionnaire, circled question seeking likes/dislikes and wrote "WHISKEY" diagonally across page. Requests to complete form properly were refused.

Hannibal adds butter and flour into a saucepan, whisking the ingredients until the roux melts into the soft color of peanut butter.

Emotional, empathic, former FBI profiler, verbally and physically aggressive, self-perceived as dominant.

Hannibal grabs a pen from the counter and scratches out ‘self-perceived as’ with two neat lines.

Unusually poor and/or disinterested cook and housekeeper. Demonstrably high IQ (n.b., omega refused all testing, physically aggressive after multiple requests). Possibly handled without due care by former homing alphas. Recommend future homing alphas demonstrate excessive coddling and/or distance, as necessary, until omega is comfortable.

Hannibal runs small, neat lines through ‘possibly’ and ‘is comfortable.’ With letters as gently placed as the strikethroughs, he substitutes the latter with ‘no longer fears continued abuse at the hands of his homing alpha.’

Heat cycles erratic, unusually draining, possibly commenced by stress/strong emotion. Violent tendencies when needs are unfulfilled. Limited desire to nest (n.b., omega spent last heat with shirt pulled over face, ignored proffered nesting materials). Denies early onset nesting behaviors.

Hannibal is drying his hands on a dishcloth when Will appears at the bottom of the stairs, still wearing the institute’s white coveralls. He’s left everything else in his room – his coat, his shoes, and, Hannibal notes, his socks. As though he can hear Hannibal’s quiet contemplation, and although looking away from him, Will flexes and then curls his toes on the wooden floorboards.

“Sorry,” Will says to a bust of Marcus Aurelius perched near the bottom of the stairwell. “I fell asleep.”

“The additional need for sleep is to be expected, considering the circumstances,” Hannibal says. “If I had truly needed you within an hour, I would have woken you.”

Will swings his head from his examination of a Caravaggio print across from the bust to stare at Hannibal. Hannibal turns to the stovetop to shut off the range and remove a large skillet from its surface. He pivots back to the kitchen island and slowly tips the contents into two wide bowls. When he looks at Will, the omega’s eyes are still on him.

“I have prepared crawfish étouffée with pickled watermelon rinds and corn maque chouxand. I considered an assortment of braised greens but, in truth, had the corn to spare.” Hannibal gestures at a plate piled high with a dozen squares of yellowy bread. “Jalapeno cornbread and, should the desire strike, a ready supply of hot sauce.”

“Oh,” Will says. “That’s . . . that sounds good.”

They spill into the study after dinner. With clear pleasure, Will accepts a glass of whiskey. Hannibal contents himself with a sweet mid-range port. He perches lazily on the leather couch in front of the fireplace with a medical journal while Will peruses the bookshelves, swirling the glass of amber liquid in his hand.

The bookshelf nearest Will is decorated with small statues and other knickknacks Hannibal has collected over the years. Italy, France, Japan. Though Will seems intent on a small figurine shaped roughly like an infinity symbol and decorated with Shinto scripture, his eyes stray to the column of books next to it. He rakes his fingers through his hair. The strands collect at his crown. For a few seconds, Hannibal can see the small blue Greek omega symbol tattooed behind the omega's left ear.

Suddenly, Will grins. His hand twitches towards a row of playwright manuscripts. He manages to correct the movement just as his fingers brush one of the leather bindings. His hand lands to grip the edge of the shelf. After a moment, he discards the tumbler on the bookshelf to grip it in both hands.

"You're free to grab whatever interests you," Hannibal says. "And sit wherever suits."

Will considers the various figurines on the nearby shelf before cupping his hand over the infinity symbol.

"It's your choice, of course," Hannibal says. "But I neither can nor want to pretend you haven't been reading what you've liked over the last thirty or so years, omegan or no."

Will pulls his eyebrows together. "Is this a test?"

Yes. "No. Omegas are no longer entirely prohibited from reading."

Will stares at his hand cupped over the infinity symbol for a long moment, clenching and unclenching his fingers around the smooth stonework. "Ibsen."

"Which-ah, yes, but of course. *A Doll's House*?"

Will wrinkles his nose. The rueful grin returns. He snatches the manuscript from the shelf but holds it limply between his fingers, his other hand still clutching the figurine. "I was just about to ask if you had anything that wasn't a treatise on 18th century culture or cuisine."

"I'm sure I have a copy of *The Iliad* somewhere nearby."

"Probably written in Latin, if the rest of your library has anything to say about it."

"*The Iliad* was written in Homeric Greek, not Latin." Hannibal pauses. "Although I daresay it was not called Homeric Greek at the time. Ionic Greek, if memory serves."

"Bullshit you can read ancient Greek."

Hannibal smiles down at the medical journal. "How flattering you think I can read Latin."

"Can you?"

"Passably."

"*Passably*," Will says in a perfect, petulant mimicry of Hannibal's voice.

Desire pools low in Hannibal's bowels. It gathers teeth when a hot blush riots up the back of Will's neck to stain his ears red. The omega hunches his shoulders, shooting Hannibal a look from the corners of his eyes, before inhaling, likely to assess Hannibal's mood. Slowly, his shoulders relax.

Hannibal's instincts grumble.

Will stands still for a moment longer, the manuscript in one hand and the figurine in the other, before exhaling heavily. He replaces the manuscript on the shelf in favor of the tumbler.

The fireplace is alive and warm, the flames high on the logs and the artificial light low in the room. The deep yellow-orange hue flickers across the side of Will's face not hidden in shadow. As Hannibal watches the flames dance, he runs through the list of conversation topics he must address with Will before returning him to the institute.

Too many of the topics, Will's feelings about the Chesapeake Ripper first among them, will not bear fruit until the omega develops at least a modicum of comfort in Hannibal's presence. It's an obstacle to be sure, particularly in the face of such an anxious, fidgety creature, though far from a barrier. There is a process to be followed, steps which deserve to be respected.

First, he must plant seeds.

By the bookshelf, Will's shoulders twitch.

Slow and steady.

"I'm curious about something, Will, if you'd care to indulge me."

Across the room, Will shrugs but can't quite stop the grimace that pinches one side of his mouth and cheek together. Age lines appear vividly by one eye.

"Dr. Chilton informed me the orderlies took to calling you *the proditor*. The traitor of compassion. Would you tell me why?"

Will snatches at a book on apparent reflex – *An Anthology of German Psychiatric Texts* – but keeps it held shut. "I'm sure it's in my file. Or Chilton told you. It's one of his favorite stories."

"I'd prefer to hear it from you."

With decision, with inelegance, Will rounds the red bergère near the fireplace and falls into it, his back against one armrest and his knees thrown over the other. He sneers at Hannibal. Little omegan fangs peek out from between his lips. "Are we bonding, then, doctor? Is this the precedent you're setting? You do know I'm pretty far out from my next heat."

"I don't understand your meaning."

"Well, you're a bit older than me."

"I am."

“So-so what, you have kids? Need a live-in babysitter?” Will gestures around the room with the book. “It’s a big enough house. An unhappy spouse?”

“Neither. I do have an occasional housekeeper that tends to the cleaning. Woodward. Charming fellow, not unlike yourself. But I have no desire to replace him.” Hannibal retrieves his port glass from the side table. He eyes the omega over its rim to consider his expression: tight jaw, lips parted past the point of social courtesy to leave his teeth bare, flushed cheeks. He fires a shot. “And before you ask, I don’t own a pet either.”

Will’s jaw flexes. The flush at his cheeks warms. “Got it.”

Hannibal twists the glass between his fingers. He only just manages to avoid turning to the study’s entrance when the scents of fire, charcoal, gas, *destruction* rise like a cannon blast in the room.

“Yeah,” Will says, closing his eyes. “I know, it’s me. Give me a second.”

Hannibal picks the medical journal up from his lap but doesn’t look at it. “It would appear I do indeed smell like anger.”

“As it turns out, all alphas do.” Will’s fingers drum against the book in his lap. *Tap, tap, tap.* “Wouldn’t you rather know why Jack thinks I’m dangerous?”

“Jack Crawford does not strike me as the type to confide in a man like Frederick Chilton. I would be most surprised to learn such information was in your file.” Hannibal looks down at the journal. “I was under the impression this was a rather new revelation for Jack. Which means he’s come to visit since you presented.”

“That’s right.”

“And both informed you of his conclusion and the fact that he had shared it with me.”

Tap, tap, tap.

“Would you like to tell me why Jack thinks you’re dangerous?” Hannibal asks. “I imagine it has much to do with the state in which you left some of your homing alphas.”

When he looks at Will, the omega holds his stare. “The way you were looking around the conference room, back at the institute. When I got upset. You thought there was a fire, didn’t you?”

Hannibal ignores the abrupt shift in topic in favor of inclining his head. *Slow and steady.*

“So,” Will says, “so, you’ve seen a fire before. Or been in the middle of one or whatever. Childhood home burned to the ground or something?”

“No. Though it appears I was correct in my earlier assessment. You do indeed have a memory of fire that your mind has tied inextricably to anger.”

Will neither nods nor shakes his head but continues to stare at Hannibal sidelong and through narrowed eyes, as though Hannibal is reflecting back light.

When the omega's gaze drops back to the book in his lap, Hannibal says, "Was that the first time since presenting that someone experienced your emotions with you?"

"As far as I know."

Hannibal doesn't need his instincts to warn him against pressing the omega further. Mere hours under his roof and already Will is unfolding so exquisitely to his careful prodding. He's a hesitant thing to be sure, with petals curled away from the sun to protect his core against roving predators.

But he'll unfold eventually. Hannibal will make sure of it. Even if it means he tears the petals out himself.

Still, it's difficult to ignore the way Will is looking at him. Tentative, wary, nervous, all of it cut through with a luminous, blistering thread of *hope*.

It'll rot the boy from the inside out, Hannibal thinks with pleasure.

"In the before-time or whatever," Will says, "I was empathic. I'm sure Jack's said enough about it. When I presented, it kind of . . . morphed into something else. I've always been able to get into peoples' heads and understand what makes them tick, you know? The good stuff, the weird stuff, the bad stuff, all of it. Now? Now, I just make people smell or hear or see or really just *relive* moments of their lives when I'm really feeling something." Will shrugs, though the gesture is little more than the angry twitch of his shoulder. "I make them feel bad when I feel bad. It makes me hard to be around, I guess."

It's the faux-casual shrug that gives Will away. In it, Hannibal knows a brilliantly intelligent boy who sees far, far too much. Standing at the edge of the sandbox, the playground, the athletics pitch. A boy who has no choice but to connect immediately with every child he sees but receives no meaningful connection back. A child in shades of chocolate and blue, quiet and unkempt and beautiful, holding tight to a valuable social currency with no known exchange rate.

Hannibal swallows the imagery like tar. "You've spent your entire life forced to empathize with others and now can force others to empathize with you. And they call you a traitor for it."

The muted burn of Will's gaze sets Hannibal's skin *alight*.

He lets the omega stare. Lets Will unpeel the first layer of his skin with tentative fingers to look underneath, consider whether the skin, this suit, might be hiding something worth examining. Lets him run cautious hands over Hannibal's bared flesh and absorb the words, the weight of them. Lets Will *taste* him.

"My emotions, they – you don't seem to get trapped in your own memories like everyone else does. No one else, I mean, they're not really empathizing with me, are they? Not if

they're only thinking of their own stuff."

"No, I'm afraid not. They only see themselves," Hannibal says. "A shame, really. How much you could teach them."

Will nods into his glass. After some time, he rises to use the restroom. When he returns, he reshelves the anthology and plucks the Ibsen script from the shelf. He folds himself onto the rug before the fireplace to read, his back against the edge of the sofa at Hannibal's feet.

* * * * *

They sit in silence for hours. Will drains the tumbler slowly, savoring the smoky flavor of the drink as his muscles relax and his face warms. His instincts settle into the muck of their silence, having long since learned he's unmovable to their wheedling when drunk. He reads *A Doll's House* until the words begin to blur.

There's a constricting vine of unease spreading behind his breastbone, slow and unwieldy and relentless, threatening to settle in his chest. He knows its source – Hannibal Lecter unnerves him. But with alcohol stuttering the cogs in his brain and laying peacekeeping hands on his skin, he's not sure why.

Eventually, the wild knock of his heart eases until he can absorb the words on the page without panic directing his attention towards the alpha. A long time after, he leans his head against the leather sofa and cradles both the script and tumbler to his chest. When he does remember, his head shoots up with a crack that makes him groan. He looks around the room. He must have dozed off, as there's soft early morning light winking through the slits between the blinds, though he can't remember falling asleep.

Hannibal is gone. So are the tumbler and book. The fireplace is dampened. Will leans forward, wincing at the flare of pain in his tailbone. His movements are sloppy, his body canting left or right when he tries to stand. He stumbles towards the fireplace to clutch at the mantel, grinning until he rights himself and the world rights with him.

He pilfers a long piece of tape from Hannibal's desk.

In his room, he retrieves the cellphone from under the mattress.

The adjoining den is dark, the only light offered by whatever dim glow of the rising sun can find its way in through the curtained window at its farthest side. It's too dark to see much more than the suggestion of furniture, their edges blurry and shifting in the poor light. There are some chairs nearby, possibly a couch against one wall, an end table, a coffee table. The rug under his feet is slightly too scratchy to be anything other than obnoxiously ancient and foreign. A large, bulky shape dead center in the room reveals itself to be a desk when he skims his fingers across its wooden surface. Silently, he tapes the phone to its underside.

He turns back to the window and freezes.

A bookshelf.

Two bookshelves.

They frame the bay window, each as tall and wide as the window itself. There are dozens of books. Hundreds. A *thousand*, maybe, stacked in neat and orderly little rows.

He places a palm flat against the nearest row to feel the bumps and divots of their spines. Quietly, so quietly, with the vowels clumping together in a slur, he breathes, “Are you for me?”

He’d only just read *A Doll’s House* the night before. And now . . .

It’s been months since he was last offered a book. Any book. Anything that wasn’t the newest issue of *Better Housekeeping & Homes* presented by an alpha who reeked of expectation that Will be so very grateful he’d been thought of at all. Reading material that wasn’t what an alpha kept squirreled in the bathroom, worthy of nothing more than easing them through their morning constitution.

For a long moment, he fights the ridiculous and completely overwhelming urge to press his forehead against the rows. When he finally gives in, he’s grateful for the low light that hides the heat at his cheeks. His eyes stray back to the desk. In one corner is a tall blob shaped roughly like an umbrella that must be a lamp. In the center is a dark, thin, rectangular shadow.

His breath catches. *A laptop.*

A few alphas had given him omega-friendly cell phones, programed to do little else but dial out to a handful of pre-selected numbers. One had provided a child’s laptop which Will, his heart thumping painfully in his throat, had turned on to find only a single file containing the alpha’s favorite recipes. He’d deleted it at once, smiling like a ditz when the alpha asked what happened. Shame had flared white hot when she’d rolled her eyes and lamented the uselessness of his gender. Only Mason had given him access to the internet.

He stares at the desk. Something warm and tentative bubbles behind his ribcage just as one of his instincts rises from the muck. *Perhaps this one isn’t like the others.*

Panic flares. He lunges at the lamp, his fingers flailing at its base to find a switch. There’s a frantic, endless moment where he can do nothing but blink against the sudden onslaught of light before he looks back at the desk.

He stares.

Catalogues.

Not a laptop. Catalogues.

He pushes the top one aside, then the second, but stops when he sees the white-on-black logo of *Better Housekeeping & Homes* underneath. The deep, hot shame is back in his lungs.

He collapses on his new bed fully clothed, ignoring the scents of brine and fish as they begin to gather in the room. Just before sleep finally takes him, he hears water lapping at the edge

of the bed.

Dreaming of the Sea

Chapter Summary

Will reveals a little of his darkness. Hannibal disappoints.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That night, Will dreams of the sea.

He stands dead center on a blackened inlet. To his left and to his right, mountains in the shape of human vertebrae rise in sharp peaks, cradling his beachy oasis like teeth cradling a tongue. The gray sand beneath his bared feet shifts as he walks towards the water's edge.

The sea cracks and heaves against the cliffs, though it laps calmly enough upon the shore. Still, Will knows a siren when he sees one. If he stands still for too long, if he closes his eyes and loses himself to the sound of the water eating up his precious land, he'll find himself wandering too far out again. Far past where the sand might welcome him back whole.

The sea is endless. An inky nothingness that becomes less substantial the farther it spreads. His inlet, his delicate stretch of beach, grows smaller each time the tide rises. The waters are consuming a little more of the land each time they breach the shore, and they never return as much as they take.

Will doesn't dare turn his back to the water. But had he, he knows he'd see hundreds of small divots pocking the sand, marking each of his footfalls. A crude testament to the months he's spent wandering the shore, his gaze held heavy and thick by black water.

Where, across the shimmering wasteland of the sea, the deadlights remain.

The lights were dead the first time he'd come here. And they'd remained dead until . . . until one flickered tentatively to life. And then, after a time, two. Then, three. Now, four little lights are alive, astounding and achingly beautiful in their white-yellow glare. They're spread across the horizon with a god's deference to order, right at the indelible non-point where the dark, starless sky bleeds haplessly into the water below.

Only two deadlights remain.

Will knows what comes next. As waves continue to crash at the mountains, as his inlet shrinks, the little time he has left in this world shrinks with it. And once the last light flickers to life, he can finally lay himself down on the gray sand, close his eyes, and let the sea swallow him whole.

Then, he can finally drown.

He smiles. "I know," he says aloud to the groan of the sea as it pelts headlong at the cliffs. "Soon enough."

The lights fade. His beach, already rendered black and gray in the colorlessness of all things at night, fades with it.

In the morning, the sea follows him into the den.

The only literature here are children's books.

He stands at the threshold to the room with a thumbnail between his teeth, uncomfortable in his half-zipped coveralls. His head is cocked away from the worst of the sunlight streaming in between the opaque curtains.

He spits a piece of nail onto the ground. His instincts are quiet but at attention, ready to soothe should his annoyance flare into something more destructive. He pulls one of the books from the shelf at random. His gaze is caught at once by the triangular splash of green at its top right corner, the golden Greek omega symbol within. The words *AG: Appropriate for All Genders* is written below it in a dark, sans serif font.

He's never been much of a reader. Not unless forensics textbooks, journals, and the occasional trashy science fiction novel he'd felt compelled to hide from even his dogs counted. He'd always reshelfed the novels with their spines turned inward, away from the room at large. As though his dogs could read. As though he knew anyone worth inviting over who might raise an eyebrow at the fact that he'd owned two editions of *A Galaxy at War* and none of *Moby Dick*. As though he'd ever had anyone to invite over at all.

He scratches behind an ear. Alana might have come, had he gathered his wits enough to invite her. Beverly, too, if he'd thought to ask.

He replaces the book on the shelf, spine inward. Just as it slides smoothly back into place with a satisfying *thunk*, he feels the ghost of water lapping at his feet.

This is what Hannibal Lecter thinks of you. Blindly, he splays one hand against a series of books too thin to be anything more than stapled together. He presses against them until the laminate pages bend and the staples dig into his fingers. Prickling heat rushes to his palm. *This is what Hannibal Lecter thinks of your entire fucking gender.*

One of Will's instincts raises its head from the gloom. Though it keeps its mouth hidden well beneath the muck, tentative in the face of Will's mounting fury, he still hears it speak. *He respects omegas.*

Will presses his hand harder against the books. "They're children's books," he says aloud. "*Children's books.*"

They're still books.

“I thought-“ Will swallows down some of the salt and brine permeating the room. “He let me read . . . Why would he-if . . . I-“

The alpha’s words clatter in his head. *And they call you a traitor for it.*

He knows the mistake he’d made at once. Sitting in the study, warm from whiskey and the fireplace, he’d let *hope* trickle in. Naively. Stupidly. *Shamefully.*

He should have known better than to think the alpha had actually *seen* him, understood him. He *does* know better. He’s been in the presence of more than one alpha or beta who’d proclaimed to believe in some measure of equality between the genders, only for Will to watch as their actions failed to align with their words.

He’s met Frederick Chilton after all.

He’s never liked the small, stuffy man, but had tolerated him well enough as a consultant on the rare occasions he deigned to leave his tower at the institute to join Jack, *et al.* at a crime scene. A tolerance that had snapped neatly after Will had said, “*Come on,*” with a hysterical type of panic during their first meeting at the institute, just as the beta was seating himself behind his desk. “You don’t have to keep me here. You know this is all . . . it’s all bullshit.”

Chilton’s expression had been calm. Serene. *Indulgent.* He’d sounded genuinely amused when he said, “Do I?”

“*Don’t* you?” There had been enough disdain in Will’s voice that Chilton had narrowed his eyes. “I mean, seriously. I’m in my late thirties. I work for the FBI for fuck’s-“

“Worked.”

“-I . . .” Will had paused and only just managed to stop himself from gripping at his chest where something hot and wet was unfurling in terror. He spoke to the top of Chilton’s cheap, tacky desk. “I’ve been living alone for almost twenty years. There’s obviously been a mistake. Just . . . just let me go home.” When Chilton’s face had remained impassive, Will had run his fingers against his pants, gripping the fabric where it gathered over his knee. “You worked with me. We *worked* together. On the-the-“ He snapped the fingers of one hand in the air, the other squeezing at his pants until it hurt.

“The Candygram Killer,” Chilton had said. “And the Detroit Strangler.”

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks. My head’s been a little muddled since, uh, since the heat and everything.”

Will had looked away as a blush followed the words. His gaze lingered on a bookshelf tucked to the side of Chilton’s desk, to the disorganized books and papers spread across it. There had been far fewer books than he’d imagined the director of an omegan institute might have on hand, but a black one with block color lettering had immediately caught his eye.

He pointed at it. “Look, you own my book. See? I was one semester from getting my doctorate at Georgetown for god’s sake, I mean-“

The blush had eased enough for Will to make eye contact. The expression on Chilton's face stopped him cold.

Chilton's small, closed-lipped smile was friendly enough. He was giving Will his full attention. But the placidity frayed a little on the edges where condescension was beginning to settle in deep. It was something in the tilt of the doctor's head, the way his chin was perched on a closed fist, the little smile that grew more annoyed the longer Will stared.

Will wondered why he'd ever let anyone look at his dogs like that.

Days later, Will sat in a group therapy session dressed in his first pair of white coveralls, numbed and panicked all at once and desperately, frantically unsure what to do. It was then he'd learned about omegan instincts. It was then that he'd finally been able to give name to the malignant crash and hiss of voices in his head.

The instinct to nurture.

To nest.

To breed.

To obey. To submit. To keep the peace.

To be beautiful. To *create* beauty. To fill a void, any void, with lovely, pleasing things for everyone else to admire. As though suddenly anyone but himself mattered.

Instincts. Instincts that the institute's doctors suggested had likely been rearing their heads since birth. They'd said it with small, sweet smiles for the small, sweet creatures before them. The omegas around Will had nodded and Will had sunk further into himself.

Standing in the middle of his den, in the heart of Hannibal Lecter's ostentatious manor, Will's thoughts turn to the house he's left alone and abandoned, adrift on a sea of frozen snow. The second floor where he'd only tread twice in all the years he'd lived there. Where even his dogs failed to roam, as though their master's failure to mount the staircase had been evidence the rooms above were haunted by some nefarious creature. A ghost. Or a demon.

The house had not been beautiful, though. It had barely been furnished.

In the den, Will grabs a handful of blankets folded neatly in a rattan basket and crawls under the desk, bundling the fabric around himself. He carefully unpeels the masking tape from around the phone he'd secured under the desk and brings it with him under the blankets.

Do you still have a job? He sends the message to Matthew and closes his eyes.

The skin at his nape and under his arms prickles with heat. But the soft weight of the material, the way whatever detergent the butler – Woodward – uses just barely overshadows the capsaicin burn that permeates the rest of the house, the *comfort* of it all begins to seep in. He lies down under the desk and lets it.

The phone buzzes in his hand. *God bless doc Bloom.*

Good. Chilton's a quack. Will runs his fingers over the buttons. Know anything worth sharing about Hannibal Lecter?

Matthew takes a long time to respond and with it, Will's desire not to overheat finally overpowers his urge to remain bundled. He untangles himself from the blankets with an urgency that makes him think of mercreatures fighting against fishing nets.

Doc Bloom loves him. No criminal history or complaints to medical boards. No complaints in his file neither. All's good?

Will takes a deep breath. *It's fine. Any word from Randall or Mason?*

Nada. Need anything?

Will declines when the phone vibrates in warning that the battery is running low. He rolls his head a few times against the ground. The *skrek, skrek, skrek* of his scalp over the wooden floorboards is soothing.

Will tilts his head back. He scans the underside of the desk and across the room to the nearest wall socket. He'll need to figure out a better plan to keep his phone charged.

In the meantime, he can wait. All he can ever do is wait.

* * * * *

Hannibal calls Will to dinner most nights. With lines of *The Bountiful Duty* playing behind his eyelids and the book tucked under his arm, Will attends.

Each night, Will thinks about setting the manor on fire and watching it burn to the ground.

Each night, he attends dinner.

It's a game and Will must play. But as he walks down the polished staircase one night after the next and across hardwood floors that never show the oily outline of his bare feet, he wonders whether the doctor will let him. The house is always clean. The food always expertly prepared. Hannibal alone tends to the grocery shopping. Will's coveralls and boxers and the socks he rarely wears are forever laundered and folded into a neat pile on the ottoman in front of his bed.

With the phrase *remember, omega reader, alphas are as sweet to you as you are to them* ringing in his skull, he'd even asked if Hannibal might like company on his errands. He'd practiced in the mirror beforehand, images of Matthew's soft smile and kind hands leading the effort. But the alpha had only eyed him for a long moment before shaking his head with a gracious smile.

Sitting at the dining table night after night, Will's thoughts return to reading *A Doll's House* in silence on the rug in the study. He thinks of the way Hannibal looks at him across the dining room table, as he does now. Silently, mildly, Will returns the gaze, his mind screaming, *Don't look at me like that!* with an echoing clatter that pushes his ever-present

headache towards a migraine. And as the alpha stares back, Will can almost see the words lifted from Ibsen's script: *Can't I look at my richest treasure?*

He thinks of Hannibal ensuring his presence isn't meant to replace a lost pet, of the way the alpha hasn't so much as leered at him since his arrival, and of the two remaining names in the back of his little green book that he aches to erase with a dribble of spit around his thumb.

He thinks and he thinks and he thinks, until the pending migraine turns from a threat to a promise and he's scrambling at *The Bountiful Duty* for instructions (something, *anything* to explain what the alpha wants) even as shame rises like sludge behind his ribcage.

Will is scanning the book's index at the dining room table when the doctor sighs.

"All the available literature in the manor and you insist on reading that drivel," Hannibal says. It's the first sound either of them has made tonight, the crackling fireplace and the soft tinkle of cutlery the only others. Still, Will flinches. "I recommend you dispose of it. There isn't an institute director worth his salt left in this country who considers it better than refuse."

Will freezes but manages to suppress the whine building in his throat. Days ago, he'd scavenged Hannibal's study for pens, highlighters, sticky notes to mark the book, plastering its pages with so much extra fodder that the spine creaks when he touches it.

"I'm—" Will starts, stops. "I'm trying to understand my part here, doctor."

"They used to write the same type of literature for beta women," Hannibal says as though Will hasn't spoken. The alpha looks at his fork before raising it to his mouth. "Many years ago, long before I came to America. I have no doubt some less enlightened parts of the country still do."

Hannibal leans over the corner of the table towards Will, close enough that their knees graze. The muscles in Will's thigh tremble, but he doesn't pull away. A sneer tugs at his upper lip.

"We clearly haven't learned our lesson," Hannibal says, his eyes on Will's mouth. "Or Dr. Chilton hasn't yet learned his." He flicks his fork at the book. "Burn it."

Will closes the cover slowly but keeps the spine gripped between his fingers. *Remember, little omega, alphas are as sweet to you as you are to them.* "Okay. Okay, so you'll tell me what you want, then?"

"What I want."

"Chilton said you aren't interested in marriage or children, so . . . yeah, what you want. Or whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing here."

"Do you desire to embody typical omegan roles?"

Will's mind pitches into darkness.

No.

Yes.

Maybe, if it's the answer that will keep him at Hannibal Lecter's manor in the heart of Baltimore instead of locked up at the institute. "I-"

Hannibal glances at his face and, all at once, seems to register and accept Will's internal struggle. It makes the alpha look unhappy. Or, Will supposes, as unhappy as Hannibal ever looks, which amounts to little more than a slight tightening at the corners of his mouth. Will inhales, trying to scent what the alpha is feeling, though he knows it's a wasted effort. The doctor smells, as he always does, of nothing more than the smoked peppers and bonfires of his natural scent.

"Dr. Chilton spoke the truth," Hannibal says. "However, if you desire to embody typical omegan roles, then by all means, embody them. If not, you're a complete person in your own right, gender notwithstanding."

"What's the point, then?"

"The point?"

"To having me here? What am I supposed to do with myself, if not what's in this book? You know, like, what do I *do*? What do you want from me?"

To his disquiet, the doctor narrows his eyes. "You're afraid."

"I'm annoyed." Will pushes *The Bountiful Duty* a few inches across the table. "You won't tell me what you want from me and order me to burn my only other source. If it's not barefoot and pregnant, then what is it?"

Hannibal pushes the book back towards Will with a long finger. "My apologies. It appears my attempt at a joke fell quite flat."

Will snatches at the book and brings it to his lap under the table. He folds his fingers over it. "A joke."

"A bad joke, clearly."

Will clutches at the book until his fingertips throb. "Jack said you were interested in meeting me."

"I was. And am glad to continue doing so. Despite my profession, or perhaps because of it, I find myself most content alone. As any pack animal, however, I do enjoy occasional bouts of socializing. But it's a rare thing indeed for someone to pique my curiosity so profoundly that I invite them into my home."

"Then-"

The searing look Hannibal gives him across the corner of the dining room table brings a renewed flush Will can feel from his chin to his hairline. He dips his head towards his plate, squeezing his eyes shut against the heat of it, but freezes when he feels the sharp tines of

Hannibal's fork under his chin. With a soft pressure, Hannibal lifts Will's head until he's forced to meet the alpha's gaze.

Responding to an instinct he doesn't understand, Will whines in a high, trilling tone that sounds like the tinkle of bells. "*Please, alpha.*"

Hannibal closes his eyes, his expression caught somewhere between pleasure and distaste, though it's brief and doesn't quite match the grimace at his mouth. Carefully, slowly, smelling sweetly of *amusement* and something more bitter, like dark chocolate dipped in gasoline, he says, "Speak plainly, Will."

Will closes his eyes and dips his chin demurely, letting the tines of Hannibal's fork dig into his skin. He conjures images of every sweet sigh, pouting mouth, and coy look he'd seen at the institute. In a voice he doesn't recognize, the words stuck and wailing in his throat, he says, "I want to know what pleases you."

A few seconds pass. He doesn't dare meet Hannibal's eyes.

Whatever Hannibal finds in his expression must suit him because he removes the fork to pierce a cut of meat from his plate. "What I want from you, Will, is nothing more than to know you." Hannibal nods at the table, over where *The Bountiful Duty* is still clutched in Will's lap. "You are, understandably, consumed by your newfound interest in the intricacies of omegas and betas and alphas, like any fawn upon birth. But I am not interested in you for the sake of your gender. It is only because of it that I have an opportunity to meet you."

A hollow feeling ruptures in Will's chest. "You didn't have to do this, though. I mean, you work for the FBI. You could have come see me at any time if you wanted to get to know me. You didn't have to wait until I was . . . like *this*."

"I'm aware."

The hollow feeling takes root. "That . . . that doesn't exactly ingratiate me to you, doctor."

Hannibal looks delighted. "It wasn't meant to."

* * * * *

As has become their routine, they spill into the den after dinner. For a change of pace, Hannibal takes his glass of port to his desk where he sits before his pens and a fresh sheet of sketching paper. He had been careful to avoid catching the omega's eye once they finished dinner. If he had, the page would soon be full of nothing but furrowed brows, frowns, and that single lock of the omega's hair near the crown of his head that stands pin-straight against his curls.

After a fitful half hour, Hannibal sits back in his chair. It's a surprise and then no surprise at all to see a handful of honest attempts to draw something, *anything* but some odd, disjointed half-sketch of the omega's face. Yet, there it is. The bare branches of what's clearly a dead evergreen tree meld and reshape to capture the tilt of the omega's chin when he frowns. The

rough outline of a setting sun is one of Will's eyes, thick-lashed and mournful as it descends behind a distant mountain range.

Hannibal crumples the page between his fingers and gestures to the red bergère before the fire. "Sit with me, Will, would you?"

Will has lived at the manor for weeks now. Yet, the omega still freezes, as he does now, when he's not expecting Hannibal to speak to him.

Will turns enough to look at Hannibal with one eye before shaking his head. "N'thanks."

Hannibal sighs but relents. He sits with crossed knees on the leather sofa, a glass of sherry beside him. He retrieves his recorder and a patient's file from where he'd left both on the side table the evening before. He leans back on the couch and makes quiet, steady comments into the device. It's a low-effort task that requires little of his attention, and so he's free to watch Will as the omega scans the bookshelves. As his hands *dance*.

Will's fingers skim book spines. Fingertips grip the coveralls over his chest or a shelf or the tumbler. His hands move in and out of his hair. He puts a thumbnail between his teeth. More than once, he frowns at the ground, his fingers brushing against his palms as though easing an itch.

Sometime later, Will's coltish fingers pluck a frantic melody across a small collection of English cookbooks. He stops at one, leaning closer to read it. Hannibal can't tell which volume has caught Will's eye and then doesn't need to when Will mouths the title with a flat look.

He turns to Hannibal. If he's surprised to see Hannibal already staring at him, he doesn't show it. "*Historic British Cooking?* Seriously?"

"If your question is whether it contains a single recipe that doesn't involve combining basic ingredients into a cauldron of boiling water over an open field, the answer is no. It wasn't my most inspired purchase."

Will snorts, half his wide mouth curling down in a wry grin.

There's anxiety rolling from the omega in waves. The scent of it is bittersweet and languid, like earthworms and a humid bog. Hannibal watches him, soaks in Will's temperament like mana, and doesn't bother to suppress his delight.

Hannibal has spent most of his life, in childhood and after, hiding behind the assiduous control he has over the muscles and sinews of his body. Each expression, each intentional sigh, each decision whether to plant his feet or move or pivot or shift weight from right to left has been an innate calculation meant only to *achieve*. Born from hardship and tended by the fear of being the only child in a world of bigger, stronger, faster beings, he's carefully cultivated himself to be a blank slate by outward appearance.

But dear Will, beautiful Will, with his glass face and too-bright emotions, is enthralling in his nakedness. A nakedness that tonight, with a soft, sweet, omegan, "*I want to know what*

pleases you,” had sealed Will's fate.

Hannibal now knows Will would do *anything* to prevent Hannibal from returning him to the institute. The knowledge is like a drug. Will has already revealed himself to be far more interesting than Hannibal had anticipated. He's shown a particular aptitude for ignoring his instincts entirely, a state of being that Hannibal himself has not yet perfected. In fact, Hannibal is almost certain the omega finds actual pleasure in doing the exact opposite of what his instincts command. It makes him reckless, reckless enough that other facets of Will's personality are beginning to leak through the crevices.

There's a darkness in the boy. Hannibal doesn't yet know the shape of it, but every now and then, in those brief moments Will lowers his guard, Hannibal can see its outermost edges. It calls out to him from the void, inviting him to unfurl his own monster and stand it shoulder-to-shoulder against Will's.

Soon enough.

Until then, he'll push the omega towards revealing himself. That flowering crevice deep within Will where the darkness lies dormant, protected by the night orchids and dahlias that highlight the sheer uniqueness of him. He'll allow the omega to burst and fade like a firework. He'll smother the omega with the attention and luxury his gender demands until Will feels like royalty among men. He'll bend Will to suit his needs until he can extract anything of worth or interest from him. He'll bring the proditor to heel. With tenderness, with understanding. With teeth.

And if the omega resists? If he holds onto his rigidity, preferring to cling to his own strength instead of Hannibal's?

If he *breaks*?

Well, Hannibal can stitch just as well as he flays.

Next to the fireplace, Will goes ridged. He unfurls slowly from his crouched position. He's been browsing books on a lower shelf, as though he doesn't already know Hannibal's library by heart. The omega turns his body a little in Hannibal's direction, ostensibly to retrieve the tumbler where he's left it sweating on a shelf. Wild eyes dance across Hannibal's face, running from his brow, to the set of his jaw, before landing at the small smile at his mouth.

“Tell me what you dream of, Will.”

Will continues to stare, lips parted. At times like this, Hannibal wonders if Will can read his mind. Wonders, too, how poorly Alana and Frederick had assessed the extent of his enhanced abilities. Hannibal's tongue darts out to catch his own lip and Will mimics the gesture.

Beautiful.

Hannibal broadens his smile, softens it. He thinks pleasant things. Slowly, the tension ekes out of Will's neck and shoulders.

“What do you dream of, Will?”

A different tension curls its fingers into the back of Will’s neck. “Water. The sea.”

“You fear drowning.”

“I didn’t say it was a nightmare.”

“You didn’t have to. Come morning, you often smell distinctly of fear and sweat. And Woodward informs me he must wash your coveralls each day, lest they begin to reek of it. I assume you sweat through them at night?” Hannibal pauses. “And you scream in your sleep.”

Will blanches and rubs at his throat, though he recovers almost at once. “Well, it’s not like you left me anything else to wear.”

Hannibal opens his mouth, a rejoinder hot on his tongue, but stops when he sees Will, the frank *largeness* of him, so atypical for his gender. “No,” he says, eyeing Will’s body dispassionately. “I suppose I didn’t.”

Will frowns.

“You may have noticed there are a series of clothing and home furnishing catalogues on the desk in your den. If the clothing in your closet is unsuitable, please choose what you’d like, and I can order it for you.”

Will ignores Hannibal's words. He contemplates his whiskey. “I really don’t fear drowning. No more than anyone else does. But I do have dreams of the sea.”

“Describe them to me,” Hannibal says. “Please.”

To his surprise, Will’s pupils dilate and his lips part. The quick furrow of Will’s brow tells Hannibal the omega is just as surprised as Hannibal is by the reaction. Hannibal rewinds the last few moments to pause over Will’s expression and examine it.

It has all the hallmarks of arousal, but none of the physical effects. There’s no unconscious twitch of his hips to forestall a possible erection, no rabbiting pulse at his neck, no coquettish, omegan dip to his gaze.

It must be something else then, something a little less. *Desire?*

Hannibal presses play, fast-forwards until he catches up to the here and now, and pauses again.

There.

Right there.

Longing.

Of course. The odd, empathic boy at the edge of the playground who only wants to be seen. The adult beta with a beloved, valuable social gift his peers instinctually shy away from. The omega who has finally, finally been able to give voice to his gift – to show, truly show the most precious, inner part of himself. And who, in the end, is called a traitor.

The proditor.

Hannibal's soft *please* had been a request to learn more about Will. And Will *wants*.

Hannibal unspools a different future for he and Will. One where kindness and compassion soldier them forward. Sweet words and soft adulation. Where Hannibal might coax the omega's secret heart to the surface with doting acceptance.

He discards it at once. The omega will be brought to light with teeth.

Hannibal's return smile is genuine. "Please, Will. I would like to know more about your dreams."

Will nods. His eyes are unfocused when he says, "It's . . . it's just one dream, really. I'm on a little inlet. By a shore. Each time I'm there, there's a little less sand. The sea is eating it all up. And there are cliffs and mountains all around me. They . . . I don't know why, but they're shaped like human vertebrae."

Desire punctures Hannibal's groin.

Will looks at his glass with a soft flush. "But that's not-I don't think that's the point of the dream. There are these, like, deadlights, far off in the middle of the ocean. I-" He pauses. "Can I show you?"

"Show me?"

"Yeah, just-" Will takes a few steps forward, until he's close enough to reach his hand towards Hannibal, his fingers cupping the air.

Electric blue meets maroon as Hannibal touches the center of Will's palm. He closes his eyes.

For a long moment, nothing happens. He's not quite sure what to expect – a movie reel to play behind his eyelids like a memory? To be transported, body and soul, to some other dimension, another time, like most people who wind their way too far into Will's path when he's emotional? Something else entirely that Hannibal doesn't have the language or imagination to consider? He opens his eyes to look at Will and-

Oh.

Hannibal isn't sure what he's seeing, isn't sure if he's seeing anything. There is only color and light whirling like a kaleidoscope deep in the crevices of his corneas. Each time he tries to focus on anything, it bursts into light and then fades like a snippet of film.

And then, Hannibal is on a cliff high above a roiling sea. He looks around. Far, far out in the water, a number of lights blaze furiously.

Distantly, back in the study, Will sighs a beautiful, sweet exhale that breathes camphor and the sticky, sweet scent of amber across Hannibal's brow.

There are deadlights, far away. They have been out for a millennium or more.

But closer to shore, where waves breach land turned black with neglect, a man stands alone.

The fire in Hannibal's study pops as a log settles on the flames.

He'll drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

But for now, while he can, the man raises his hand to turn the lights back on.

Hannibal blinks. Blinks again, and when his eyes open, he's back in his study, his hand hovering in the air above nothing. Will has retreated to the far side of the fireplace, his eyes wide and fixed squarely on the ground. His fingers tap a quick staccato beat against his thigh.

Electric blue pierces Hannibal in place. They scream in a language he doesn't know.

The man will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

It takes a moment for Hannibal to find his tongue. "The sea is coming for you."

Will inhales. *Obsession* tugs at the piano wire in Hannibal's gut. He avoids Will's gaze in favor of the distant lights Will had just shown him, so unprotected against where the dark sea bleeds into the black void of the night sky. There are no stars there. No moon. Nothing at all to guide Will across the black, fallow land he's forced to watch the waves consume.

The answer - the message that Will just showed Hannibal - is there, though poking with brittle fingers at the edges of Hannibal's mind. A dark, bleeding mass that dissolves between his fingers when he tries to claim it.

Will waves his hand. A little of the tension at his neck and shoulders dissolves. It screams of relief. *Relieved to have been seen a little, relieved for the rest of him to remain hidden.*

Irritation snaps at Hannibal's feet.

Will smiles, soft and sweet. He raises his glass in a mock salute before turning to continue browsing the shelves, his back turned completely to Hannibal.

* * * * *

Will wakes with violence to a velvet duvet and winter rain hammering against the window. He turns over, away from the worst of the damp sheets, to stare blindly into the dark.

His mouth is sticky, his lips cracked. He wonders if he's been screaming. He considers trying to go back to sleep but roams the manor instead.

He trails his fingers along anything within reach as he moves. There are enough windows and too few window dressings that even in the middle of the night, the full moon and ambient

light of the city unfurl a gray-blue haze into the corridors to guide him. He touches as much as he can, imagining himself as a phantom – a particularly benign and odorous one – creeping along shadowy corners and hidden spaces where he doesn't belong while the master of the house sleeps. Up one flight of stairs, down another, up a third somewhere further in the back of the manor. His feet sometimes stick to the wooden floors but otherwise, he's soundless.

Crossing back through the first floor and towards the staircase, he sees a light coming from Hannibal's study. He considers passing the open French doors without acknowledging his own presence but stops when he hears Hannibal speak.

"Havre de Grace."

Will jerks at the words.

The tell-tale trill of the alpha's computer floats into the hallway. A mechanical voice responds, "Havre De Grace, abbreviated H-d-G, is a city in Harford County, Maryland, United States, situated at the mouth of the Susquehanna River and the head of Chesapeake Bay. It is named after the port city of Le Havre, France--"

"What are you doing?" The words are out of Will's mouth before he can stop them. He leans against the wall outside the study with a grimace.

From within, the mechanical voice dies. Will inhales, scenting the air for some sign of Hannibal's emotional state, but smells nothing. Shrouded in the blue-gray darkness of the corridor, he inhales again.

"Will?"

Will enters the study in increments.

Hannibal is seated at his desk, dressed down for the evening. A tape recorder is between his fingers, his laptop open before him. His gaze on Will is calm. "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

"Are *you*?" Will snaps back.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. He places the recorder on the desk. Unease coils in Will's stomach.

"Would you care to join me?" Hannibal asks. "And, if not, please collect your book before you leave. You left it in the kitchen this afternoon."

The Bountiful Duty is face down on the leather sofa in front of the fireplace. A gummy, wet feeling begins to unspool in Will's gut. He licks his lips. "Havre de Grace."

Hannibal's responding smile is a little rueful. "I read the notes you made. I hope you'll forgive me. I was curious to see what insights an omega in your particular set of circumstances might take from it. The back cover proved far more interesting."

“Oh?”

Will’s eyes are drawn to the slight squeak of Hannibal’s chair as the alpha leans back in it. Despite a frantic search through the repertoire of his vocabulary, there’s no word but *hungry* to describe the look the alpha is giving him.

Hannibal’s smile turns sharp. “I won’t pretend we know each other well enough to expect you to reveal why the addresses of Mason Verger and Randall Tier are written there. Though I am curious.”

Will retrieves the book with a quick gesture, his bones singing with the need to *leave*, to *run* before the good doctor exacts whatever punishment is most appropriate for wayward omegas creeping through his house at night and leaving their shit-

“Will?”

Will flinches. It’s only then he realizes he’s been staring at the fireplace with the book clutched hard to his chest. “I – sorry, I . . .”

He closes his eyes and cannot altogether swallow another grimace when he hears Hannibal stand. Will feels water pooling at his feet as the alpha pads softly across the wooden floorboards towards him.

When he opens his eyes, Hannibal is leaning against the edge of his desk, his hands in his pockets, his head cocked a little to one side.

“I thought you might like to know that Mason Verger has been arrested,” Hannibal says slowly, his eyes on Will. “He’s been charged as a collector. Almost 20 omegas were discovered on his property, all with enhanced abilities.” He pauses. “Randall Tier is alive and well.”

With the book clutched to his chest, all Will can do is nod.

“I won’t ask about the names. But since we’re near enough the topic, perhaps you’ll indulge a different curiosity.” Hannibal doesn’t wait for Will to respond before he says, “Why does Dr. Bloom believe you might go in search of Mason Verger?”

“*Does* Alana think that?” Will fights the urge to rest his forehead against the nearest bookshelf as a headache blooms under his eye. “Christ. That’s, uh, that’s kind of heavy for a middle-of-the-night conversation, doctor.”

When Hannibal remains silent, expectant with a tilt to his head just so, Will sighs.

Because of Margot.

Because Mason mostly left him alone.

Because there were so many other people to talk to at the Verger Estate.

Because Mason thought he was powerful.

Because Mason made him feel like he was useful, despite – *because of* – his gender.

Will says the last reason aloud, turning away from Hannibal to hide the blush rioting across his neck. He flicks one hand at his own body, intending to encompass his innate *omega-ness* with the gesture.

Hannibal's eyes follow the angry wind of Will's hand. He runs a finger against his lip, frowning a little. "But Mason Verger is a collector."

"Yeah," Will snaps. "And he made me feel useful. Knew I was useful, actually." He pauses, ignoring the thrash of his instincts. "Can I ask *you* a question?"

"Please."

"Why aren't you married?"

If Will hadn't already been staring at Hannibal, he's sure he'd have missed it: the way the small lines of tension in the alpha's face smooth back into marble. The way Hannibal's chest twitches, just a little, as he shutters himself, his emotions, whatever humanity still clings to him behind that lean, aristocratic façade.

Will takes a step forward, his palms tingling. "Well, that's not fair."

Hannibal smiles. "Few things are."

Shameless, Will thinks. *Completely and utterly shameless*. He opens his mouth, one or more unkind thoughts already there on his tongue, but closes it when Hannibal gestures to the laptop.

In a single, fluid motion, the alpha pushes himself from the desk with his hip and moves to the study door. As he passes Will, he says, "The password is *verisimilitude*," before leaving the room to disappear down the hallway.

The fight leaves Will all at once. He taps at the book still clutched to his chest before sinking into the chair at Hannibal's desk. Even then, he hesitates. The alpha's natural scent is *pungent* behind the desk.

He touches the track pad, blinking against the light of the screen. It takes him two tries to type in the password. Anxiety begins to swirl in his stomach as the desktop loads to an informational article on Havre de Grace, Maryland.

He grips the knee of his coveralls, winding the fabric between his fingers. Lost to the heady rush of panic, he doesn't notice his instincts stirring until one of them speaks. *See? He does respect omegas*.

"Jesus fucking hell, *shut up*," Will hisses back.

He types Mason's address into a website promising him a satellite view of the planet. An image of Earth spins until North America is on the screen. Slowly it zooms in, first on the United States, then on the eastern seaboard, then on Maryland and then . . .

Will's heart gives a single, painful thud when the screen stops on the Verger Estate. His eyes skip across verdant land, sparse trees, and gray rooftops. The main house is at the end of a ridiculously long driveway, the slaughterhouse to its left. There's a dock and a handful of warehouses. He pauses on a small, white square on the far side of the estate he knows to be the wellhouse before moving on to the outdoor pigpen, the stables, one barn and then another. The satellite isn't strong enough to reveal the electric fence that borders the property, but there's no reason to suspect it's not still up and running as intended.

A quick search through Hannibal's desk reveals a piece of loose paper and a pen. With one eye on the open study door, Will places the sheet over the lit screen. He traces the eastern shoreline and a few of the larger buildings. To it, he adds a compass, a scale, and labels as many of the landmarks as he can remember.

It would be generous to call the map anything but a scribble. Still, it'll serve its purpose. He folds it in half and then into a quarter, slipping it into the breast pocket of his coveralls. The paper crinkles beneath his fingers.

Tomorrow, he'll start with a rough sketch of Randall Tier's property. Then maybe he'll review some news articles to confirm the world has indeed kept spinning in his absence. He might even browse TattleCrime to see what the FBI has been up to.

It's a comforting thought and one that stays with him as he closes the laptop and returns the pen to Hannibal's desk. It follows him upstairs to his room, gathering warmth behind his breastbone. He sleeps soundly, his hand tight around the piece of paper.

The next morning, he folds himself comfortably into the red chair before the fireplace in the study, the laptop balanced comfortably on his knees. He types in the password.

Incorrect password.

He tries again.

Incorrect password.

A weightless feeling begins to flutter in his chest.

On the third try, a second message appears.

Incorrect password. Last changed: 1 hour ago.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who might be interested, I based the layout of the Verger Estate on a farm that does indeed exist at the mouth of the Susquehanna River in Havre de Grace, Maryland. It can be found on Google Earth at:

<https://earth.google.com/web/@39.51948323,-76.1105916,11.47912662a,601.93885053d,35y,0.28646057h,43.54914832t,0r>

The Hurricane

Chapter Summary

Will dives into his omegan instincts. Hannibal is almost smitten.

Chapter Notes

A friendly reminder that Hannibal's distaste for certain kinks are not necessarily my own. . . . We don't kink shame here.

Will wakes sticky and hot late into the morning. Sweat and heat lay trapped in his underarms and the backs of his knees. The rest of him shivers.

At some point during the night, he'd kicked off the bedding until only one corner remains on the mattress instead of in a bundled heap on the floor. The small triangle of fabric is clamped tight between his legs, as damp and acrid smelling as his flesh.

In the shower, he scrubs at his scalp with his nails. He turns the water hotter and grits his teeth against the burn.

He has nothing to wear that fits but the coveralls. They're still in a crumpled heap between the door to his suite and the bed. He snatches at them but doesn't bother to bring them to his nose – they reek of sweat and unclean musk from a distance.

He stands naked and dripping before the small handful of clothing in his walk-in closet. There are a few t-shirts, a few button-ups, a handful of khaki and wool pants. He rifles through the lean stack a few times before finally choosing a simple cotton shirt and a pair of silk pajama pants that expose his ankles.

He feels constricted and trapped in the shirt which rides up to show most of his stomach when he flexes his arms to loosen it. In the end, he sighs and runs his fingers through his wet hair. He ignores the memory of how the black ensemble Mason had made him wear had gripped the harder planes of his body in ways that had comforted him.

With the coveralls wound in one fist and his little green book in the other, he descends from the second-story landing. Halfway down, he pauses to scent the air. The manor smells of peppers and bonfires, like it always does, but the scent is somewhat dulled. The alpha isn't home.

In the laundry room, he moves aside a basket of the doctor's clothes so he can open the lid to the washing machine. He glances back at the basket once the machine is set, shifting his weight between his feet as his instincts roar to life. They demand he be *kind*, be *obedient*, be *good* and wash the doctor's clothes, too.

"He has a housekeeper, for fuck's sake," Will snaps back, turning off the light switch by punching it.

His instincts chatter restlessly.

In the glare of the open refrigerator, Will concedes that there is food in the kitchen. Food in the shape and form of things that he can put into his mouth, chew, swallow, and which will keep his muscles moving and his heart beating. But there isn't any actual *food*.

It's early enough that he wants cereal or some breakfast-inspired pastry. He eyes the mad scientist labyrinth of glass and copper Hannibal uses as a coffee maker and resigns himself to another caffeine headache. He'll settle for a frozen waffle, even. Something he can stick into a toaster while rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Waffle *batter* might even work. He looks around the kitchen. The massive thing must hold a waffle iron somewhere.

He starts digging.

The rub of his clothing and exposed belly make light, calming, swishing noises as he moves. His bare feet stick lightly to the floorboards. Before too long he finds a can of what appears to be ravioli in tomato sauce, though its label is in a vaguely Baltic language he doesn't recognize. He searches further for a microwave, half-amused and half-annoyed to find it tucked in the rearmost corner of a cupboard behind an absurd amount of glass-ceramic cookware.

At some point, he begins to move things.

He starts the process in a fit of pique after he's unable to find a can opener. There are dozens of cupboards, many more drawers, and despite finding all manner of instruments well beyond the breadth of his culinary knowledge, the can opener remains elusive. After opening a third drawer in which a fourth set of kebob skewers glares back, he removes each from their respective homes and begins to sort the rest.

In the end, the butler catches him rearranging the kitchen.

Woodward finds him long after Will's grown warm and prickly in his clothes. At some point, he'd shed the t-shirt, which he'd thrown haphazardly on the ground or the kitchen island or somewhere else far out of his way. Every so often, he leans across the stainless steel countertops or runs the entire length of his arm against an open cupboard door as he closes it, letting his skin touch as much as he can. His presence, his scent, will linger that much longer for being half-naked.

A soft voice like an electric pulse at the nape of his neck urges the thought forward. *Good omega*.

When he finally notices Woodward, he doesn't know what to say. It's only the second or third time he's seen the man properly and the first time he's doing something he might get in trouble for. Anxiety tightens into a hard little knot in his stomach.

He really doesn't understand what he's doing except that snippets from *The Bountiful Duty* ardently recommend applying *sweet, soft, pleasant pressure to cajole your dear alpha into seeing your side*. The book doesn't explain *how*, precisely, to apply such pressure and Will wonders whether he's ever done *anything* sweetly or softly.

More pressing, however, is that the book fails to provide any insight into *why* he feels compelled to rearrange the kitchen. But he had, he does, and he finds it puts him at ease.

He'd misplaced the can of ravioli a while ago.

"Again?" Woodward asks.

Will sets down a drawer of utensils he's been pawing through. In as serious a tone as he can manage, he says, "I've done this before, then."

"It seems to be a habit of your kind."

Will returns the butler's impassive stare from the corners of his eyes.

He's always had trouble reading betas. He'd only detected Woodward at all because the man had shuffled with noisy emphasis into the kitchen. Still, it's no trouble to imagine what Woodward sees when he looks at him: unusually thick and silken curls, bright blue eyes almost too large for his face, pale skin, a certain soft roundness to even out the harshest lines of his mouth and jaw. All those indefinable omegan attributes combined to make him so *pretty*.

Oh, my, what a beautiful little boy you are! The same words from teachers, from coaches, from the parents of the few friends he'd gathered along the edges of the bayou as a child. Words that chased him throughout his childhood and adolescence like a plague. Accompanied by sidelong glances from his father as he'd headed towards puberty and which had faded when he'd failed to present omegan.

"I think you've just answered your own question," Will says to Woodward. He resumes rummaging through the drawer, poignantly aware of his sweating, half-clothed state. "One of those weird omegan instincts, you know, *the uncontrollable urge to rearrange cutlery*."

He doesn't want to upset the man, but Christ, he's like a witch's familiar. Following Will around the house, ostensibly to clean and tidy. Appearing from the shadows, his scent so faint Will can almost never tell where he might be. Giving Will empty, dead-eyed stares as though he's spent more than a little time as a corpse, reanimated solely to clean the doctor's house, and finds himself struggling to ease back into the living world.

Another snippet from the book pokes at the inside of his skull. *Let those people who know your alpha best tell you what your king and/or queen may enjoy*.

Now that we're finally on speaking terms," Will says, retrieving two long spoon-shaped utensils embossed with letters in approximately the same language, "are there any insights you'd like to share about Dr. Lecter?"

"He dislikes putting his kitchen back together."

Will is on the brink of rolling his eyes before the soft scent of summer strikes him. Warm breeze, open field, grass and pollen, a bonfire. Rimmed, only slightly, by a sharper burn that sets Will's teeth on edge. *Amusement*. Will inhales. *Wry amusement*.

He grins at the old man. "Look who has a sense of humor."

Woodward looks back at him with the expression of the recently deceased and shuffles from the kitchen. Will doesn't see him for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

Hannibal sits in his office. He can't remember his patient's name.

"He's so lowbrow, Dr. Lecter," the omega says with a trilling whine as he looks around the room. He slumps lower in the chair. "Cheap beer and delivered pizza. My parents would be so disappointed if they knew."

"Perhaps a divorce is in order."

It really is an unfair suggestion. But the widening of the omega's eyes and the flush that rises across his cheeks and chin will likely satiate Hannibal's more destructive impulses for the rest of the day.

As the patient stares at Hannibal and as Hannibal fights the urge to check the time, his phone buzzes on the table next to him. He turns to it, not bothering to hide his interest.

I don't think your butler likes me.

The text is from the omega-friendly smart phone Hannibal had purchased for Will. He'd left it as a gift outside Will's bedroom door earlier that week. Simple, easy-to-use, without access to the internet, Hannibal's phone number and emergency services included as the only two contacts.

Will had initially refused to use it with a fury. He had, in fact – to Hannibal's immense amusement – discarded the first one into the garbage disposal, only relenting when a second phone appeared on the kitchen counter without wrapping paper or a note scrawled in Woodward's shaky hand.

With the text, Will forwards a few-second clip of Woodward's grizzled face, made more dour by the obvious manner in which Will records him.

Then you're in good company, Hannibal responds.

When Hannibal refocuses on his patient, what little light had swept through the room with the lit screen of his phone dies with it. He fights back a sigh.

He should have known better. Omega patients so rarely seek out alphan mental health professionals. This patient, like too many of those before him, had allowed his gaze to traipse furtively across the holy trifecta of Hannibal's office the moment he'd stepped inside: the lack of a wedding band on Hannibal's finger, the lack of photographs on his desk suggesting a partner or children, and the broader, sharper absorption of his appearance.

Hannibal isn't immune to such things. He knows he retains more than a small vestige of the hard-lined European good looks that had allowed him to sate the whims of his young adulthood.

A pretty boy in a bar. A pretty girl at the store. A lean back bent like a bow. The glimpses of flesh exposed in long arcs by what little light ever trickles into the depths of alleyways. Panting and heaving. Damp skin and damp hands. Writhing.

He turns fewer heads now, but those that do turn are younger by far. And they behave in ways that bore and frustrate him, even when they are pliant between his hands and his weight is heavy on the sinuous curve of their backs.

Like how *daddy* has slowly, poisonously crept into the vernacular of his trysts. The way he fades in increments each time he hears it.

The omega across from him looks just young enough to say *daddy* in that half-serious, half-ironic way that sets Hannibal's teeth on edge. He isn't too young, though, to have been ruined by the grandiose mimicry of pornography. He may even be old enough to have developed particular tastes . . . to be capable, perhaps *truly* capable of both taking and giving his pleasure.

Hannibal cocks his head. The patient's gaze sharpens.

Will would never use such unfortunate language.

Will is a thing of novelty, however. A shiny new toy Hannibal remains thrilled to return home to. He's never understood the draw alphas have to omegas as little more than pretty decoration for a night on the town or a quick fuck. He can achieve both himself from a well-fitted suit and his own hand. The scent of an omega in heat floods his veins with as much desire as the next warm-blooded alpha but is, in the end, little more than a function of biology. A thing easily enough ignored in favor of worthier pursuits.

Like the scene Will had shown him. His little inlet out at sea. Hannibal has thought of little else since. He'd scoured the books in his office in search of answers (*what*, exactly, Will had shown him and *how*), though they'd offered little by way of explanation.

He'd even telephoned a handful of old acquaintances at Johns Hopkins to seek their insights. They'd all been fascinated by Hannibal's discovery, of course. One had even referred to Will's enhanced ability as a superpower. None of them had provided answers.

To the credit of Hannibal's omegan patient, he drops all pretense as Hannibal lets the besotted interest of the thought show on his face.

"Do you have a reference?" the omega asks.

With Bedelia Du Maurier's card tucked in the omega's pocket, Hannibal walks him back towards the waiting room. Before the omega steps through the threshold, Hannibal touches his shoulder lightly. The poor creature leans into his fingers. "Are you merely unhappy? Or is it something more? I profess to not really know you from-" *Adam, that's his name* "-the next man, but I may still be able to offer assistance."

Adam hesitates. The startling blue of his irises is absorbed momentarily by pupil as he scans Hannibal's face. "Only unhappy."

Hannibal holds up a finger, retrieving a second business card from a lower drawer of his desk. "In case of an emergency, then," he says, pressing Alana Bloom's card into his hand.

Hannibal waits for the outer vestibule door to close with a definitive clack before he retrieves his phone from his pocket. *I'll be home for lunch.* He sends the text to Will, smiling as again his office is lit in the soft glow of his phone.

* * * * *

When Hannibal returns home for lunch, he's struck at once by the scent of burning bread.

He pads softly to the kitchen. Four slices of burnt bread and a miasma of both too-watery and too-dry eggs are heaped on a plate on the island. Another piece of bread has burned, continues to burn in the toaster oven.

"Ah, fuck," Will says, jerking his hand from the edge of the glass stovetop. "Why is the whole fucking thing hot?"

"It's meant to be," Hannibal says, ignoring the skittish way the omega jumps at his voice. "And because I am unsure whether you are attempting to feed or poison us, I must insist you forego abominating the kitchen and sit at the island to wait."

Will sneers but settles himself on a barstool without protest. He drops his head into his folded arms.

Hannibal deposits the ensemble of Will's attempt into the sink and retrieves fresh pans from the rack above the island. "I assume this means Woodward has left?"

"Yeah," Will says, his voice muffled between his arms. "Well, kind of. I might have, uh, told him to leave when I started cooking and he just kind of stood there with a spatula in his hand looking upset. I don't think I made a new friend."

"I would be surprised if you had. Woodward is many things but friendly is not one of them." Hannibal removes a series of glass storage containers from the fridge and arranges them alongside the stove. He pours a small drizzle of olive oil into the nearest pan and tips the

previous night's dinner into the skillet. "Please grab the first aid kit from the laundry room so I can tend to your burns."

When he turns to Will, the omega is staring at his hands.

"S'fine," Will says, folding his fingers between his legs. "It'll heal."

Hannibal places the spoon on the counter and moves to Will. "Hands, please," he says, extending one of his own.

It isn't an order, not quite. Still, it has enough force behind it that Will will have to fight against his instincts not to comply. For a moment, Hannibal is sure the omega will refuse him. Will's eyes narrow, his lips twitch away from his teeth. Maroon meets electric blue. It's only when Hannibal cocks his head that Will sighs and unfurls his hands from his lap.

Hannibal runs his fingers across pale palms and fingertips turned red and beautiful by the stovetop. Desire stirs low in his belly when the omega flinches at his touch but doesn't pull away. "Mild enough damage, though I'd prefer to apply ointment and wrap them for the remainder of the day, if you'd permit me."

Will stares at Hannibal, dry lips parted. Hannibal stares back.

Will drops his gaze. "Seriously, it's not that big a deal."

Hannibal bows his head and moves back to the stovetop.

They eat in silence at the kitchen island, one bar stool between them. Hannibal reviews his notes for an appointment later that afternoon while Will thumbs through *The Bountiful Duty* with a deep frown that presses his eyebrows together.

The meat is good, warm against Hannibal's tongue. Before he chews, he runs it across his palate and over his teeth until the spices coat the inside of his mouth. Only then does he press the tender flesh between his molars, suppressing a sigh of pleasure he'd have made if alone.

Will's eyes are on him. The omega flushes and turns back to his book when Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "I'm not sure I've loved anything as much as you love what you're eating right now."

Hannibal smiles. The warmth from the food in his mouth dips to pool somewhere in his chest. He nods at the book. "Any useful insights to share?"

"Haven't you heard, Dr. Lecter?" Will says, adjusting himself on the barstool to grip the book with both hands. *"Omegas and alphas are not as different as you might think. We're all people, after all. Don't forget, if your alpha does something that surprises you, remember that we all do some things a little differently than our friends and family."* He snaps the book shut to look at the back cover. "What confused preteen was this written for, exactly?"

Hannibal stands to clear his plate, taking Will's as well after he nods at Hannibal's outstretched hand. "You're the one who insists on keeping it."

Will ignores him. *“Remember, precious omega that your alpha is your king and/or queen and you are their mate. Nurture and love them in the way they shelter and protect you. Jesus.”* Will drops the book to the countertop with a definitive *thunk*. “So, okay, I’m taking your advice to heart or whatever. How would you suggest I learn, then?”

“How would I suggest you learn to be a ‘50s betan housewife? I wouldn’t.” When Will only rolls his eyes and makes to stand from the barstool, Hannibal says, “Forgive me, I was under the impression we had put this particular issue to bed. Have you browsed the catalogues in your den?”

Will settles back on the barstool slowly. A thin blush spreads across his neck, though Hannibal can’t tell whether it’s due to embarrassment or anger. “No.”

“I might recommend you start there if you’re feeling directionless. If not, you’re free to do whatever you’d like. Surely you had hobbies before you presented.”

Will opens his mouth, looks away, closes it. He opens it again only to sigh and replace his head between his folded arms. “Yeah. Okay, thanks.”

The piano wire twists in Hannibal’s gut.

When he returns to the office, he rifles through a stack of invitations he’d optimistically gathered into a ‘maybe’ pile in the middle drawer of his desk. Most are clean, elegant things with embossed lettering and accents in gold, silver, or – for the more daring among his acquaintances – occasional flashes of burgundy and dark blue. Thus, he’s able to identify the card he seeks by one of its garishly pink corners.

He isn’t sure why he’d kept the invitation. He had no intention of attending when he’d received it and is only marginally more inclined to attend now. The cheap paper feels too light between his fingers. The fonts are childish and grating. It might be an affront to Will altogether to even suggest they go.

Hannibal presses his fingertips to his stomach.

He’s attended too many infantilizing omegan spouse birthday parties to manage even a semblance of enthusiasm at the thought of another. They’re obnoxiously similar, with the omegas crowded together in one room, bright-eyed and excitable surrounded by so many of their own kind, the betas and alphas mingling in lackluster fashion in the next. Everyone eyeing their partners with equal parts fondness, derision, and protectiveness.

A simple, carbohydrate-heavy meal favored by the omegas will be served, cake in the approximate taste and texture of cardboard to follow, presents opened, and Hannibal will leave, as he always does, with the weight of boredom and restless unease heavy in his chest. Invariably, he’ll wind up at a seedy bar off Charles Street. Later still, he’ll have a devastatingly beautiful omega bent before him, whining in a trilling purr that sets his skin on fire.

It’s not an event he can abide again, even with Will present. He flicks his fingers at one corner of the cheap invitation, smiling. A dinner party is certainly a fine alternative.

That night, Hannibal suggests Will explore the house as Frederick and Woodward had advised.

“They’re like little mice,” Frederick had said at the institute, placing a copy of Will’s file with an unsure hand on the conference room table before Hannibal. “Gerbils. Hamsters. They need to scurry about and discover the edges of their habitat and find the best place to burrow, to nest. Give him a few hours and he’ll let you know.”

The omega rearranged your kitchen this morning - it may benefit him to explore the manor, was the colorless note left by Woodward on Hannibal’s desk earlier that afternoon. *Dr. Hannibal Lecter* had been written on the front in the butler’s shaky scrawl as though Hannibal might mistake it for someone else’s correspondence.

Will has been engaging his own unique form of exploration since arriving by roaming the manor in the early hours when his nightmares fail to recede. Though he’s politely foregone digging through Hannibal’s drawers with gusto as his instincts might prefer.

Will takes Hannibal’s suggestion to explore with a hot breath of relief and a single-mindedness that cinches the piano wire in his gut.

The second and third story bannisters oversee the manor’s entryway. In the adjoining kitchen, Hannibal repositions one of the barstools to the far side of the island so he can peek up and see glimpses of the omega as he walks, almost runs around the second floor of the house. Will opens and closes doors, rummages through shelves and drawers, scoffs and, to Hannibal’s curiosity and wavering self-control to remain seated, groans with displeasure at something in a guest bedroom.

“What’s on the third floor?” Will yells across and down the second story banister, half of his lithe body deep in a linen closet.

“My bedroom.”

“Can I see it?”

“By all means.”

Hannibal hears Will bound up the stairs to his bedroom and then, faintly, “*French doors,*” with such disdain he can almost see the omega rolling his eyes. “With curtains? *Why?*”

Hannibal releases his teacup to run an index finger against the edge of the tablet. Even at a distance, he can hear Will’s various criticisms and mockeries, padded with neither empathy nor cruelty, but said simply because the omega is thinking them.

“Jesus, what is that? A fucking elk? Christ. And just the skull? Who hangs it above a bed like that?”

And then, “Why is everything blue? Why is everything in this house blue?”

And then, “Oh shit, that’s soft.”

Hannibal begins climbing the staircase when the frantic noises of Will’s exploration begin to dwindle. But he pauses, halfway between the first and second floor, when an unexpected scent strikes him. The scent is not simply present, like a forgotten candle on a chance side table, but one that spills in thick rivulets between the carved rosewood spindles of the banister to the ground below.

It’s the scent of a jungle downpour. Wet leaves and loamy moss and upturned soil, ozone rearing with the crackling snap of lightning and the sweet, musty clench of animal and plant. Then, as though propelled forward by a force stronger than himself, Hannibal is suddenly thrust into the midst of humid rainforest, dark and turbulent with an approaching storm.

He looks up, around at the dark expanse of feathered canopy and blinks to adjust his eyesight. Beside him is a sprawling cypress tree covered in vibrant green, crawling vines. As far as he can see in any direction is tall grass, far taller than himself, that brushes the exposed flesh of his arms and face.

He hesitates for only a moment before taking a tentative step forward. The toe of his loafer taps against where in actuality, in *sanity*, the edge of the next step of his staircase should be. He looks down to see nothing but shivering grass obstructing his path. Still, he raises his foot higher and then forward to plant it on the step above, pausing at the feel of spongy ground instead of firm hardwood.

He reaches to run his fingers against one of the bowed, shimmering branches of the cypress tree. Its leaves are bent against the downpour. As his fingers graze the waxen leaves, as the cawing of an unseen bird bursts and fades in the distance, he is once again on the staircase of his residence, his arm extended, absurdly, toward nothing.

He blinks, blinks again, and looks around.

The scent of wet soil, the flash of lightning, the fat patter of raindrops on wide leaves permeates the corridor and grows more pungent as he approaches the threshold of Will’s enclave. He takes a last long, deep breath and opens the door.

It’s storming in Will’s bedroom.

Torrents of rain pour from the ceiling, gather in puddles on the furniture, skip down the wainscot, and sag the curtains under their collective weight. The wallpaper bubbles and, as Hannibal watches, begins to peel at one corner. The bed, many inches further from the center of the room than it should be under the impossible deluge, has left scratches in the floor.

Hannibal reaches out a hand to the storm, dazed and slow-witted.

No water collects on his fingertips. No humidity clings to his clothes or body. No breathing spray pelts his cheeks. And when he walks further into the room and a blinding crack of lightning briefly illuminates the space, he can see that Will, too, remains untouched.

Hannibal blinks and the storm is gone.

He blinks again.

Will is motionless. He sits cross-legged on an ottoman in front of the bay window. He appears to have removed the blankets stored in the den and has shrouded himself in them all until only his head is visible. Night has fallen and he hasn't turned on either the hall light or any of the lights inside the room. The low light forces the darker planes of his body to stretch, *bleed* into the blackness around him.

At Hannibal's approach, the blankets drop from Will's shoulders. He grips at his hair. His whine is loud and shrill in the room.

"Will?"

Will shakes his head, his fingers pulling tighter against his hair until Hannibal can hear the soft scratch of calloused fingertips against exposed scalp. Hannibal opens his mouth, intending to repeat Will's name, but finds he cannot recall his voice.

Presented omega.

The proditor.

Without feeling, Hannibal says, "Will, may I come in?"

Will unfolds from the ottoman with a roar. "May you come in?" he snarls and a snap of lightning shoots across the room. "*May you come in?*" He twists his body, a puppet loosed from its strings, first left towards the bed and then right to the other side of the room. "What the *fuck* was that?" He gestures with a trembling hand toward the hallway. "What was I doing out there? I was-I was like a-a, like a little child or a fucking puppy sniffing around your house and rearranging shit and Jesus, what was I doing? *What was that?*"

It takes considerable effort for Hannibal to find his voice. When he does, it trembles. "I'm not sure I understand. You've been homed by other alphas. Dr. Chilton informed me—"

"Dr. Chilton," Will sneers. He turns left and right, fingers in his hair and then rubbing frantic circles against his palms. "Dr.-*fucking*-Chilton." He turns when he reaches the edge of the ottoman and paces again to the far wall.

The piano wire grips Hannibal's bowels. He presses the tips of his fingers to his stomach. "Please calm yourself, and we can discuss what happened. Nesting behaviors are a perfectly instinctual—"

Will makes a low guttural sound and with it, his hands are back in his hair. He spins to face Hannibal, fury and terror high on his face. "Instincts? *Instincts?* Tell me how anything, literally any one of the things I was just fucking doing is possibly beneficial to either of us. *Huh?* How? How could me running around your house grabbing and rearranging shit and gathering blankets when you already own a mattress that's probably worth-just tell me how. *Tell me!*"

"Will—"

“Tell me!” Will screams, bringing one of the hands from his hair to slice across his body as though trying to stave off Hannibal’s next words.

The effect almost brings Hannibal to his knees. A gust of wind follows the arc of the omega’s hand and rips through the bedroom. It slams the ottoman into the wall underneath the window and twists the curtains with violence around it. Hannibal has only a moment, a single heartbeat when he sees the decorative vase atop of the dresser shudder before it whips across the room and straight towards him.

It’s little more than a glancing blow to the side of his head, but it’s enough for Hannibal’s instincts to squirm violently.

Punish him!

Return him to the institute!

Terrible, awful, blaspheming omega! How dare he! Hannibal, you must control him! Now!

The wind dies at once. “Oh, no. Oh, fuck, Hannibal, I didn’t-“

One of Hannibal’s slier instincts uncurls. *Let the omega comfort you. Indebt him to you, Hannibal.*

Hannibal agrees.

He lets his knees buckle. As he does, Will closes the gap between them in two long strides. He grips one of Hannibal’s elbows and wraps his other arm around his back, half-supporting, half-carrying him the few steps to the ottoman.

Will sits him down gingerly. The omega grabs the blankets pooled at Hannibal’s back to bring them to Hannibal’s shoulders. Hannibal breathes deeply as the omega’s scent lifts from the fabric. *Amber, sticky-soft and sweet, dark chocolate, burning wood.* “I need a moment.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. I’m seriously sorry, I didn’t mean to-I don’t know what just happened-“

“I’m quite all right,” Hannibal says. He lifts one corner of his mouth in the imitation of a rueful smile. “No apology is necessary. My head may be sore to the touch for a day or two, but there will be no lasting damage. I need only a moment to collect myself.”

Behind closed lids, Hannibal relishes the increasingly anxious scent gathering around Will. He takes a deep breath and sets his mind loose to inventory the familiar scents in the room: the rich mahogany of the bed, the alpine dusting of snow-topped trees outside the bay window, and the wet, heated smell of Will, heightened and tangy by distress.

Will is still crouched before the ottoman and is already staring at him when Hannibal opens his eyes. The omega’s eyebrows are, for once, not pushed together over the bridge of his nose but raised and tilted upward. The edges of his mouth pull down into a soft frown. A purr slips between his teeth.

Perfect.

Hannibal inhales. He inhales again and there are, suddenly, additional scents in the room. Familiar scents, bold in their presence yet, somehow, impossibly too far removed from *that* time, in *this* room to exist alongside the hurricane. Will has one hand on each of Hannibal's wrists, pinning them delicately between thumb and middle fingers.

Hannibal scents the air again. "Is that you?"

"Is what me?"

"Those scents. Red wine, cumin, damp cobblestones, fresh blood."

The scents of *Il Mostro*.

Will blinks. "I-I don't know."

Hannibal closes his eyes, afraid that the ravaging claw of need hollowing out his torso might show on his face. He smiles instead. The purr Will doesn't seem to know he's making grows softer.

Only in the enveloping silence does Will detach himself from Hannibal with a flush. He flails, first left and then right, before walking with purpose towards the open bedroom door. Hannibal expects him to cross the threshold and storm off somewhere deep into the manor but instead, he turns to slump against the adjacent wall.

After a moment, Will's head drops. "I'm exhausted."

"I can imagine," Hannibal says. Rapture burns low in his gut. "That must have taken an incredible amount of emotional energy." He pauses. "Sadness? Fear?"

Will frowns. "It wasn't anything. I just got myself worked up over the-" he gestures at the open doorway "-that weird shit I was doing."

"You produced a perfect jungle hurricane in your bedroom because you 'got worked up' after engaging in typical omega nesting behaviors?"

Will's gaze snaps to Hannibal. He parts his lips in an expression Hannibal can't read. Hannibal scents the air, but the omega is producing nothing more than his own braised, tacky scent.

"Will?"

"The bayou," Will says. "It was the bayou. You said tropical jungle, but . . ."

Hannibal nods. "Of course. New Orleans. The cypress tree. I admit, I've seen very little of jungles or bayous in my lifetime. My mistake entirely."

Cypress tree. Will mouths back the words twice, three times. And then, as though sickly ill with a poison in need of immediate purge, he stumbles through an explanation. "It was the

night I thought I'd lost my dad. He'd been out fishing, and the storm came from, god, it just came from nowhere and I thought, well, I'd already lost my mother and I-I-I just couldn't, I couldn't . . . Jesus."

Before Hannibal can fully assess and perhaps reign the instinct, he's on his feet and in front of Will. Far enough to be unthreatening but close enough that if Will reaches out, if the omega needs him, he can reach back.

Hannibal's instincts thrum. *Hold him, shield him, protect him – look at him! Look at him, look at him, look at him! Shivering and small and so scared, what are you waiting for?*

Hannibal's fingers twitch.

Slow and steady.

Will doesn't reach out. Instead, he rolls away from the wall and toward the bed. His movements are stuttered, creeping with a clambering black ooze that will likely consume him the moment he lies down.

He crumples onto the mattress. Hannibal untangles the bedsheets with the impersonal precision of an automaton. With a swift shake that snaps the edge of the coverlet, he throws the ensemble across Will. Will draws the covers over his face.

Half-blind by the crawling ache in his torso, almost deaf from the crying wail of his instincts, Hannibal turns to the bedroom door.

"Please don't lie to me."

Hannibal's grips his stomach. "I'm not lying. I saw the bayou."

"What else?"

"Nothing. Only the bayou."

Will doesn't respond. Before Hannibal closes the door, the omega is snoring softly.

He returns to Will's bedroom a few hours later, after failing to find either comfort or sleep in the wash of pungent moss and foliage that lingers in the manor. He knocks at the door and when no response comes, creeps—

No, not *creeps*. *Creeping*, after all, implies a level of sleuth-like bad will when he surely has no cause to feel like a trespasser in his own home.

He enters Will's bedroom to keep vigil over the omega.

He frowns at the entryway to Will's bedroom.

Keep vigil is hardly a more accurate sentiment than *creeps*. In truth, he simply wants to watch Will sleep. Wants to see the stunning, remarkable thing shed of circumstance and

surroundings. To see soft peace settle into the lines of his face. All while knowing that a potential storm brews so riotously beneath the surface.

Remarkable. Beautiful. Masterful.

Will is on his back, the covers half-off, sweating and gripping the bedding between his fists. His brow is furrowed, as it always is. His eyes dart wildly behind his lids. With rapture still burning furiously in his stomach, Hannibal traces the taught muscles and salty sheen along Will's abdomen with his gaze, thrilled to know he's not looking at a weak creature. Is not watching someone in the throes of nightmare who had the simple troubles of simple men.

Overcome, Hannibal crosses the room and places his palm against the side of Will's cheek. He hopes but doesn't quite dare to believe the omega, in his beautiful chaos, might react with an instinctual desire to be touched. Yet, Will relaxes completely as Hannibal's fingertips skim the downward curve of his lip.

Will leans into his hand and produces a soft purr from the depths of his diaphragm. Hannibal closes his eyes and lifts his head to the ceiling at the sound.

He rubs his thumb carefully against the Will's slack brow. Will gives a sweet sigh and presses his face harder into Hannibal's hand. At that, Hannibal sits down on the edge of the bed. With a rush of pleasure that makes him certain he's stepped into a secret oblivion, Will turns in his sleep to round his body around Hannibal like a pliable, sweaty parenthesis. When Hannibal pushes the damp curls from his forehead, Will buries his face into Hannibal's hip, purring as he falls deeply back to sleep.

I'll speak of you for years, Hannibal thinks.

In the bedroom's falling light, he can almost taste the sweet melancholy of his future self reliving this moment.

It won't be regret that takes hold of him, not quite, but something close. Long after he's extracted everything Will has to offer, once he understands the beauty Will finds in the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal will pine for this moment. And it will be this exact moment: the one when Will finally stopped fighting him tooth and nail and began opening himself to Hannibal's plundering. When a universe of potential and possibility remains to them both, right before Hannibal carves it piece by piece from the omega to keep for himself. Until, when he looks at Will, he sees little more than an empty husk, all interesting tidbits that once made Hannibal burn now held between his hands.

Will had said the sea was coming for him. But before the waves sweep out that lustrous, perfect ship and drag its carcass under the brine, Hannibal will plunder its treasures. And what finally sinks below the surface – what's left of the ship, this man, once praised for the glory and wonder it brought into Hannibal's life – will be little more than broken planks and empty safes.

Hannibal leans down and presses his lips softly to the omega's temple, breathing in the scents of chocolate and sweat.

It's with a wry smile that he corrects his earlier thought.

Perhaps *trespasser* isn't such a terrible descriptor after all.

Conquered and Slain

Chapter Summary

Will *sees* Hannibal.

Will locks himself in his enclave for most of the following week.

Hannibal takes his absence in stride. Each day, he cooks two servings of breakfast, two of lunch, and, resigned, two of dinner, before seating himself alone and restless at the head of the dining room table.

He's managed to eat through most of the latest meal when Will finally emerges, rumped and wary, with the stack of catalogues from the desk in his den.

Hannibal replaces the fork and knife alongside his plate to accept the crumpled pages without comment. He flips through them. L.L. Bean, Lands' End, Eddie Bauer.

Will is no longer dressed in the institute's white coveralls but is, instead, bare-chested and wearing a pair of Hannibal's too-long silk pajama pants Hannibal had left in a neat pile outside Will's bedroom door a few days before.

"Do you like the pants?" Hannibal asks, setting the catalogues aside to spear a beef medallion. Will takes a seat at the table. "I could order a pair in your size."

Will shrugs and peers at Hannibal's plate.

Hannibal also left pairs of socks, t-shirts, slacks, and new boxer-briefs outside the omega's enclave. But judging from the tight dip of Will's hips above the low-slung border of silk and the unencumbered length of him through its front, Will has disregarded all but the pajamas. Hannibal cocks an interested eyebrow at Will's feet, hidden in soft silk, and imagines they're also bare.

"Excuse me for a moment." Hannibal goes to the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a second serving of dinner. He places it in front of Will with a cloth napkin, utensils, and a sizable splash of whiskey before quietly resuming his place at the head of the table.

Will attacks the food. His head is dipped forward as he eats, his curls spilling across his brow. One arm is wrapped around his plate as though afraid Hannibal might take it from him. He doesn't meet Hannibal's eye.

"We should discuss the hurricane, Will."

Will slows his chewing, swallows, nods. "I guess."

Hannibal is sure Will can smell him lingering in his room each morning when he wakes. Still, the omega's bedroom door remains unlocked. His sweating heft continues to curve around Hannibal's knee and hip as he sleeps.

Though, as willing as Will may be to touch him when he sleeps, he gives Hannibal his berth now, drawing a bright line between those times he can stand Hannibal's touch and when he can't.

Hannibal swallows a cut of beef with difficulty. "I saw only the bayou, Will. And please do try to refrain from grinding your teeth. It can cause permanent and serious damage."

Will snorts but relaxes his jaw. He takes a long swallow from the tumbler and sets it back on the table. He makes a motion to pick it up again but folds his arms across his chest instead.

"I could taste it," Hannibal continues. "Feel it. Smell it. It was miraculous."

Will retrieves his glass. "That's one word for it. At least you won't be upset with me for making you think of your own tragedy while I was busy projecting mine all over the place."

"I would never blame you for something so impossibly outside your control."

Will laughs around the press of the glass to his mouth.

"You've been disciplined for experiencing emotions?"

"Like a rowdy pup," Will says, popping the last word. He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth.

Saliva pools on Hannibal's tongue. He refocuses his gaze to his plate, cutting a beef medallion with a quick, sure gesture that's a little harder than he intended. "Did you end up finding your father?"

Will's eyes dart to Hannibal's hands. "Yeah. He came back to shore at the first sign of the storm. Found him waiting for me at home, worried I'd gone to sea looking for him."

Hannibal keeps his eyes on his plate, picking through the remnants of his meal to unearth a caper. He pops it into his mouth. "It's remarkably rare, you know, but not unheard of for some omegas to present with enhanced abilities. Natural talents made sharper, finer upon presenting. Although I must admit they are typically more nurturing in design."

Will raises his tumbler. His lips part to show small omegan fangs beneath a wry smile. "Haven't you heard, Dr. Lecter? I'm special." Just as quickly, the fiery look disappears. Will's eyes slide back to the table. "I feel, I don't know, *purged* somehow."

"Does that typically happen when you feel strong emotions? Do you feel less burdened after they pass?"

"No."

A roar of pleasure clutches at Hannibal's bowels. He puts two fingers to his stomach and feels the piano wire, already so tight, squeeze further.

Will's eyes flicker to Hannibal's fingers, his face, before he takes another long sip of whiskey. "How's, uh, how's your head?"

Hannibal drops his hand to retrieve his wine glass. He raises it to Will. "Quite fine. The experience was more startling than damaging." He smiles. "If you feel purged now, perhaps all you've needed was to be homed by a psychiatrist."

"Well, now. Let's not forget I lived under Chilton's care."

"A *competent* psychiatrist," Hannibal amends. He returns the sharp flash of Will's teeth. "We are, after all, trained to give a substantive voice to our patients' thoughts and emotions. If your emotions are stronger now, it may only take additional efforts to work through them." At Will's dubious expression, he says, "You disagree."

"No, not exactly," Will says, deferential but for the flush that gathers below his chin. He sips at the whiskey. "It doesn't feel like I've 'worked through' an emotion, though. They're not complicated emotions, really." He rolls his eyes at the raise of Hannibal's eyebrows. "Seriously. I mean, 30,000-foot view here. I felt the most fear I'd ever felt that day in the bayou, right? Starting life as an orphan? *That's* terrifying. So, when I did that weird omegan nesting thing or whatever, I realized all right, this is it, you're omegan, okay. It was the same feeling. Starting an unwanted life. Open and shut case."

"How's your relationship with your father?"

"I-*really*, doctor?" Will says. When Hannibal only looks at him, Will rolls his eyes again. "Uh, he was affectionate, I guess. Kind. Loved me, or I felt loved by him, or whatever. He was a beta married to a very cold and passionless alpha who left before I could remember her. He died when I was in my mid-20s from a heart attack. I think he spent every second before it worrying his softness had chased her away." Will smiles a not-smile into his whiskey. "I know who I am, Dr. Lecter. Why I am the way I am. It is what it is."

Hannibal makes a mental note to include Will's admission in his file from the institute.

"That's unfortunate, to be orphaned so young. A fact you and I have in common."

Will's eyes snap to Hannibal. Hannibal finds himself bound by the sheer frankness of the stare. They sit frozen, maroon meeting neon blue, until suddenly Will's pupils unfocus and his irises twitch away from Hannibal's face.

"Poor thing, sweet thing, my beauty," Will intones, mumbling. Liquid blue remains fixed and unseeing. "*Mylimoji*, precious, my strong and brave *brangioji*. What did they do to you? What did they do *me*?"

Will flinches as Hannibal stands abruptly from the table to clear their dishes. A warm burst from the deep hollow where Hannibal's instincts live warns him to remain silent. To let Will unburden himself as he sees fit and let Hannibal's burdens be kept his own.

Yet, as he retrieves their dishes and heads to the kitchen, he says, “You claim to feel purged. There’s a certain freedom in shared burdens, after all. Your emotions felt and experienced for what they are, rather than merely causing distress in others. Perhaps it’s only that you’ve finally been seen.”

“Yeah.” Will’s voice is small and quiet. “You, too, doctor.”

For days after, Hannibal touches himself to the heavy weight of Will’s eyes on him as he’d placed their dishes into the sink.

* * * * *

Will sits on the desk and looks at the books in his den.

He’s only been back here a handful of times since his first night in the manor, to retrieve the phone and the catalogues and circle some items in an effort to appease whatever punishment Hannibal might think to inflict for the hurricane.

But Hannibal hadn’t wanted to punish him. The alpha had been . . . interested in the destruction. He’d *seen* it. And he’d called it *miraculous*.

And then, as Will always does, he’d ruined it. Just as quickly as his bruised and tentative hope had spiked, it’d been extinguished. He’d shown too much of himself. Had *seen* too much. And though whatever flashes of a snowy forest and a crumbling old building he saw were meaningless, they’d been enough to chase Hannibal away.

It’s been five days since Hannibal last called him to dinner. A week since he’d last invited Will into his study. Will sequesters himself each night in his bedroom, unsure, nervous and sits for hours at a time and looks at the books.

Mischa’s books.

He’d missed it completely. The books are written in a dozen different languages. All of them are old, though only a few are well-worn. Will’s eyes stop on a thick, leather-bound tome of nursery tails in a language he doesn’t know. He cocks his head.

It almost comes apart in his hands when he plucks it from the shelf. He sits down at the desk, bare now but for the lamp, and opens it just a little to look inside.

On the first page, underneath a title hammered out by a typewriter, is a note written by a child’s immature hand. It’s in a language Will doesn’t know and he can read none of it other than the names at the top and bottom.

Mischa. Hanni.

Will carefully opens the book somewhere in the middle. It parts to reveal a faded, colored illustration from *Little Red Riding Hood*. There’s another handwritten note, in the same childish hand of a childish Hannibal Lecter, in the same foreign language. He flips back and forth through the pages. On almost every one is a note or an asterisk or an underlined

paragraph with exclamation marks next to it. Little sketches that are simple but stunning in their execution.

The trickle of warmth in his blood picks up speed.

He stops at a page near the back. Carefully tucked there is a black-and-white photograph. He pauses, uncertain whether he's diving into something the doctor might consider bad etiquette. But when the photo reveals a flash of Hannibal's own deeply bowed mouth, Will can't help himself.

It's only when he removes the photo that he realizes it's not a photo of the doctor but of a young girl. "Jesus," he mutters. They could have been twins. Might have been, if Hannibal himself wasn't standing in the background.

Will grins.

Even as young as he was, and he couldn't have been older than 10 or 11, Hannibal had already carried the carriage of his chest in a decidedly haughty fashion. Will isn't sure whether it's a function of his gender or breeding. What he does know was Hannibal Lecter had known who he was from a very young age.

A knock at his bedroom door startles him into dropping the photograph. In a fit of panic, he considers pretending he isn't there, but at Woodward's unobtrusive, "Mr. Graham?" he sighs and slinks down from the desk.

He snatches at the photo and pads to the closed door of his bedroom. "Uh, hey, Woodward. What's up?"

For a moment, Woodward doesn't speak. A hard knot of anxiety constricts in Will's stomach.

Is it rude of him to stand here and not open the door? Would the butler go to Hannibal and rat him out, ensuring whatever terrible mood has kept the alpha from seeking his company might lead him to conclude returning Will to the institute is the only acceptable outcome for them both?

Will's stomach turns around the knot. He glances at the photograph to distract himself.

He'd completely missed it, more focused on Hannibal's ridiculous pose than anything else. The photograph is blurry, the little girl – Mischa – the clear focus of the shot. But just behind her, Hannibal stands looking every bit as regal and austere as he does now, except for the expression on his face. Will has only one word to describe the look: *besotted*.

Had he not seen it with his own eyes, he's not sure he'd believed it was possible. The alpha is unlike any other person he's met. He gives almost nothing away in scent, which means he either doesn't have emotions (unlikely) or has spent a lifetime learning how to control them (probable). Yet, here he is, clear as day, signaling *love* and *affection* like it's the easiest thing in the world.

One of his instincts perks up. *He the only one who's experienced your emotions with you.*

Will exhales hard through his nose. “Irrelevant,” he mutters under his breath.

Will thinks of the snow and crumbling gray stone of Hannibal’s memory. The terms of endearment that had bubbled from Will like an ooze. *Mylimoji, precious, my strong and brave brangioji.*

“Sir?”

Will comes back to himself with a jerk.

“Dr. Lecter wishes for you to join him in the study.”

Will lays the photo face down on the dresser next to the vase.

When he walks into the study, Hannibal rises from the leather sofa and towards the bar, where two glasses sit. He picks them both up and hands one to Will. Will takes the tumbler and sits on the nearest sittable thing, which happens to be the edge of Hannibal’s desk.

His first impulse is to say that it’s barely noon and they’ll both probably fair better for this chat with him sober. The thought dies quickly in favor of his nerves at the cold, automaton movements Hannibal makes towards the fireplace. He moves with elegance, bending to readjust the logs, standing to retrieve a set of long-stemmed matches hidden behind a decorative mask on the mantle.

The tumbler feels heavy and hot in Will’s hand.

It would have taken a man far less empathic than Will to guess Hannibal’s intentions. He’s giving Will time to collect himself before informing him that he’s no longer welcomed in Hannibal’s home. That he’ll be returning Will in so much the same way as a defective product the purchaser must be relieved of if all is fair and right with the world.

At the fireplace, Hannibal runs his palm across his forehead.

He’s probably contemplating how best to concede that Chilton and Alana and Jack and hell, maybe even the alphas that had already homed Will, had been right to warn Hannibal away.

Maybe Will *deserves* the morsels, the good and the bad, that life has fed him.

Maybe he’s *earned* it.

His father would be horrified to see what’s become of him. A biological rent boy. A pretty keychain for someone else to wrap their fingers in and around and present to others for inspection. A . . . a . . .

Will pauses. *Is* he a walking womb, the way betan woman sometimes say they are? Does he *have* a womb? He knows male omegas can get pregnant. Aren’t ovaries and testicles kind of the same thing? He does have testicles, so perhaps not.

Horror strikes him. *Does he have both?*

His bad mood tips towards the hysterical. To stave it, he opens his mouth to ask Hannibal, only to snap it shut at the rigid line of the alpha's shoulders.

The fight goes out of him.

Hannibal had tried. Really, he had. And he'd say so when Alana or Jack asks him about it. Months with the brooding, sneering, sulking Will Graham . . . he'd done his best. What more could he have done? The obnoxious, insulting, whining thing that Will was. The self-hating, emotional – god, and *so* emotional – creature that he was.

Will takes a small sip of whiskey as Hannibal takes his own drink in hand and thinks he might, in the end, miss the freedom available to him in the manor. Even if it means he bounces off the walls like a ricocheting ping-pong ball without purpose or a defined center of gravity.

It's a relief in some ways to end whatever-this-was on this note. Before he develops some primitive, omegan attachment to the man. One he knows has been developing since the first night he'd sat at Hannibal's feet in front of the fireplace, reading something other than a home and garden magazine for the first time in months. One that has grown roots as he'd woken up each morning unmolested. As the fear slowly left him.

A feeling that, yes, it's budded, fine, but it won't leave him spending night after night huddled under his comforter at the institute, sobbing with his mouth muffled in a pillow like he had when Anthony returned him. Nor will he threaten to set everything in his sights on fire like a ravaging lunatic as he had after Mason.

There'll be no madman approach to this parting. He'll behave and he'll get over it, as he had with all the others. Even when his instincts grow black and large when he sleeps, recriminating him for failing – *again, Will, again!* – to please another alpha. Even as he shouts back mutely that he doesn't *want* to please anyone.

He just wants the sea.

He wouldn't mind going home, first. To the little white house he'd left alone and abandoned. To his dogs. The stupid fucking science fiction novels turned spine-in. To the pullout he sleeps on in the living room because he doesn't need two stories of useless rooms when it will only ever be he who lives there.

Maybe before the sea comes for him, he can convince the next alpha to let him go fishing.

Will considers the lean lines of this alpha's back as Hannibal tilts a bottle of port to read the logo despite the wine glass in his hand.

How does an alpha as seasoned as Hannibal Lecter break such news to an omega, exactly? Will takes another sip of whiskey and when the burn is relatively muted, takes another.

It's a curious thought. He's yet to experience anything approaching the it's-not-you-it's-me spiel. More often than not, he's been retrieved by the institute itself in one of its windowless white cargo vans after the alpha places a furious call insisting Will be returned at once.

Surely Dr. Hannibal Lecter of all people will be the one to say the right things.

Will can picture it easily: a dozen wide-eyed, clingy omegas sitting as he is now with their beverage of choice in hand, their backs warmed by firelight. Wet eyes and anxious teeth chewing trembling lips into a sweet, soft shade of pink Hannibal will feel compelled to sketch later.

Will removes his thumbnail from his mouth to cup the tumbler in both hands.

The doctor would be gracious, of course. As infuriatingly gracious as he always is.

He's probably let each beautiful omega know in kind words and in his cold, mild manner that he has, with the utmost misfortune to them both, concluded they are not quite what he dreams of in a partner, if he dreams of partnership at all.

He will placate and he will soothe. Whether the desire comes from instinct or professional deference doesn't matter. He'll nod with a small, sad smile as he says that yes, of course, *of course* he finds them attractive and will always say as much even when not asked. And yes, *of course* he finds them to be delightful, engaging company though it'll always be a lie.

Will shifts on top of the desk.

Hannibal will say, *But really, sweet omega, what could any reasonable person glean from the one-sided glass and the two-dimensional description contained in a file? In truth, so much more of any couple's time is spent outside the bedroom than within and, really now, what possible conversation could rouse the interest of such an educated, well-traveled doctor when his opponent – Will shakes and then nods his head – when his potential partner has achieved so little?*

Sweet one, Hannibal will say, *you have seen the manor after all, have you not? You've seen the harpsichord and the books in my study written in a dozen different languages. My sketches. You've tasted my food. Drank my wine.*

Yes, Hannibal will say, one hand near but not quite touching the wet-eyed creature before him. The suggestion and purposeful refusal of comfort. A cruelty the omegas will feel but won't be able to vocalize to anyone who asks, the heartbreakingly innocent things they are. *Although you will likely question your innate worth to hear it – which was never my intent, of course – you must know my words are true.*

You know, precious child, you must, even as I paint them in simpler, kinder strokes for your easy consumption. Your mistake was believing your gender alone could enrapture me to you. Your mistake was believing that I, too, desired companionship above all else.

It was not your mistake to make, of course, as it's truly a function of the visuomenès, of the innately flawed American outlook towards omegas, but you did adopt them for yourself, did you not?

I am wealthy, Hannibal will say, without apology or excuse. *I am talented. I am intelligent. I am strong.*

So, tell me, precious, sweet thing, what it is you could offer me? What has any omega to offer me?

Tell me, why should I continue to home you?

“I’ve been so very patient, have I not?” Will says aloud, the words accented and lilting. From somewhere far away, he feels Hannibal still. “I grow older, but I do not age. Not in any way that matters. Not, my beauty, in a way you could appreciate.”

For the first time in a very long time, Will is home. In that weightless purgatory that comes for him at crime scenes. The divided world, half of where he sits, here, on the edge of Hannibal’s desk, and half of where Hannibal sits across from far too many beautiful, weeping omegas.

In both halves, the fireplace crackles.

Will closes his eyes. “Decades have been spent honing my talents, maintaining my ancestral wealth, perfecting and broadening myself into a pinnacle of alphan-“ he shakes his head “-a pinnacle of *human* perfection. A masterpiece of the best humanity has to offer. And so, my precious omega, my sweet thing, my joy, if you are not my match, I can wait a little longer to find the one who is. I’ve waited this long, after all.”

From a distance, he hears the rustle of fabric and imagines Hannibal turning from the fireplace to look at him. He knows it’s true when he inhales and can no longer smell the peppers and fire of Hannibal’s natural scent, but a distinct lack of scent.

The non-scent of pure, mind-numbing *shock*.

“Challenge after challenge offered, confronted, and slain. For decades. For almost half a century now, I have conquered and did so with incredible power and precision.” Will swallows. “Until I didn’t.”

Hannibal inhales.

“Until one morning, I couldn’t. Until I woke up and everything was wrong. It was a mess. All the trophies and framed artifacts evidencing what I’d accomplished, it all-all of it – my piano, my-my-“ Reality tugs at Will as he stumbles to recall a word he doesn’t know but Hannibal does. “The electronic instrument-“

“Theremin.”

“-my-my theremin.” Will swallows again to steady his breath. “My degrees and publications and the beer I barrel with my own hands fermenting in the garage, the food I so carefully prepare, everything all at once lost its shine. All the evidence of everything I’d achieved . . . I slayed every single challenge brought to me and collected their hides. Until they weren’t trophies anymore. Until they were just . . . *slain*. Carcasses that had been felled by my own hand. *I decorated my house with them.*” From deep in his chest, Will gives an ugly bark of a laugh. “I surrounded myself with them, framed and shelved. My pretty little awards. And ever since, I’ve hunted down novelty like a sport. All I want-”

“Will.”

Two images spring to life behind Will’s eyelids – one of a starving young boy who holds his shrunken chest with the furious pride of fallen nobility, the other of a child’s name, Augustas, scrawled in chalk on a cracked and faded blackboard. Will opens his eyes. “Who’s Augustas?”

Hannibal gives him a long, searching look. In the low light of the study, his maroon eyes are almost black. They dart, quickly – *reptilian* – to Will’s fingers as they flex and grip the tumbler. The harsh bow of Hannibal’s lips parts slightly in an emotion Will can either not scent for how faint it is or which the alpha is using all of his might to suppress.

Will feels his own lips parted in sympathy.

“Augustas,” Hannibal says, stressing the letters oddly so the name takes on a foreign appeal. “A stupid boar of a child I knew in my youth, unworthy of the effort it would take to tell the tale.”

Will nods, disappointed, and looks down at his drink. “That’s why you’re not married, right? Hard to have a living, breathing corpse walking around your house that you’re tied to legally.” When Hannibal says nothing, when he *smells* of nothing, Will sighs. His throat feels stuck. “And it’s really why you homed me, isn’t it? Another challenge to conquer. What, the *proditor* brought to heel?”

He doesn’t know what to make of Hannibal’s expression. There’s something coiled tight in the line of Hannibal’s shoulders that doesn’t fit with the softness around his eyes.

Will blinks. Hannibal blinks back but slowly, like a large cat at ease in his own den.

Will looks away. “What does *visuomenès* mean?”

From his peripherals, he sees Hannibal jerk at the word. It’s a gesture so unlike him that Will almost jerks back.

“Remarkable,” Hannibal breathes. His pupils dilate until black swallows red. “Its literal translation is ‘society,’ though it also captures the nuances of human behavior within a certain social group. ‘Cultural differences’ is, I believe, the closest English approximation.” He pauses and the air feels thicker. “It’s a word I think frequently when comparing the differences between American society and those of my homeland. It’s been a very long time since I’ve heard my native tongue. ”

“Remarkable,” Will says back quietly.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal says. “Masterful.”

Will considers raising his glass in a mock toast. He sticks his thumbnail between his teeth instead. “You’re returning me. It’s why you wanted to chat, right? Whatever . . . whatever the reason you homed me, it hasn’t come to fruition. I’m not worth the emotional energy or the

headache or whatever.” Will catches the alpha’s gaze, sees the smile that shows only around his eyes, and bares his teeth. “Is this *funny* to you?”

The smile dips the catch the edges of Hannibal’s mouth. “No.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“I’ll admit, I was indeed reminiscing about the conversations I’ve had with some of the omegas I’ve homed.” Hannibal’s smile widens until his teeth show. “A fact your empathy clearly picked up on.”

Will’s stomach clenches.

“But I have no interest in returning you to the institute, at least not yet. Though this does present us with a chance to discuss our expectations moving forward. In the spirit of full transparency, it is unlikely that I will wish to home you for long. My tastes are as fleeting as the tide. It takes much to captivate my attention for long.”

A kind of desperate fury erupts in Will’s chest. With it, his skin grows hot. “*No*,” he spits. “No, don’t. Don’t wave the threat of returning me like a-like a *carrot* until you get the behavior you want from me.”

Hannibal’s blink this time seems incidental. “You misunderstand, Will.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“You do,” Hannibal says. “Your insights last week after the hurricane brought up a number of events I’d prefer to keep dead and buried. As a result, I’ve behaved accordingly.”

Mischa.

“But,” Hannibal continues, “I’ve come to view your homing as an opportunity.”

“An opportunity.”

“Yes. It’s become increasingly clear to me that Drs. Chilton and Bloom have failed to give your enhanced abilities the attention they deserve. Am I correct in my assumption that you, too, may not know the full extent of them?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know, would I?” Will snaps.

Hannibal’s smile softens. “I thought not.” He returns to the bar and uncorks a dark bottle of wine. “I am not returning you, at least not at this time, although we do need to return to the institute soon.” Hannibal holds up a hand as Will’s mouth twists. “Briefly, but together, and we will leave together. It has also come to my attention that I have politely begged off the last few requests from Dr. Chilton for a routine check-up. It would seem this is the longest homing for either of us and I believe he wants to ensure one or the other of us remains whole.”

Will snorts. He skims trembling fingers through his hair, dipping to stop at the homing chip tucked behind his ear. The tattooed skin feels worn and rippled under his fingertips, like abused leather. “I’m pretty sure this thing goes off or whatever if my heart stops.”

“I believe Dr. Chilton is more concerned with my safety than yours.”

“Oh. Well, okay. I-I guess that’s fine. I don’t know, are you asking my permission?”

“No,” Hannibal says. “If I know Dr. Chilton as well as I think I do, he will likely insist that you undergo regular . . . chats with a mental health professional until he’s assured you no longer present as a danger to yourself or others.”

“Myself? I didn’t realize I was.”

“Nor do I believe anyone Dr. Chilton recommends you speak with would conclude otherwise. Still, I’d like you to have those chats with me.”

Silence hangs thick and heavy between them. Hannibal seems content to wait it out, his expression polite but neutral. Will is frozen at the edge of the desk, his fingers stilled where he’s been scratching at the tattoo.

The way Will’s head is dipped, his neck extended, staring at Hannibal as he is through his upper lashes, he’s sure he couldn’t have hidden his unease if he’d wanted to. “That, uh, that seems like a pretty massive conflict of interest, doctor.”

“It is.”

It’s the way Hannibal says it – simply, confidently – that lessens a little of Will’s tension.

He doesn’t need his instincts to burble in the muck with excitement to know what it means. The omega, the sweet, docile thing he is, is *content*, *relieved* even to give up his decision-making faculties in favor of an alpha.

Will wants to tear his own throat out. “Uh, well, I mean, yeah. Okay. So . . . so what would that look like, exactly?” He feels a sarcastic smile tug at his mouth. “You want me to lay on the couch with my eyes closed? Talk about my daddy issues or how my mother’s abandonment shaped me into the person I am today? ”

Hannibal remains silent for a long moment. Finally, just as Will feels the uneasy start of a flush at the back of his neck, Hannibal flicks a speck of dust from his shirtsleeve. “If you insist. Though I imagine that’s rather low-hanging fruit. Regardless, there’s no reason for our sessions to be so formal. I’m certain I will glean whatever I need from our daily conversations. An email or two each week to Dr. Chilton informing him that you’re right as rain should resolve the matter with expediency.”

“And if it turns out I am a danger, to myself or someone else? What then?”

Hannibal smiles. “I fail to see how Dr. Chilton having such knowledge would benefit either of us.”

Will's instincts are humming, pleased by his easy acquiescence. Will himself feels only relief.

But there's something lower, something a little deeper, something a little less human and a little more reptilian that stirs in the muck. It raises its head and turns sharp teeth towards Will.

Will looks away.

A Compromise

Chapter Summary

Hannibal takes Will to the institute for an appointment. Jack seeks Will's help. Frederick plays a dangerous game.

A few days later, Hannibal sits in his office and tries to maintain his composure.

His *home* office, as it is, after a pipe had burst in what he's quickly come to refer to as his *actual* office.

It's put him in a foul mood for days.

"I must admit, I'm surprised to see you again, Adam, considering how our last session ended." Hannibal closes his office door. He adjusts his cuffs before sitting across from his patient with a warm if not slightly waxen smile.

He's struck anew by how truly stunning the omega is. Sweet and blonde, warm and smooth, soft and supple and eager. Light blue eyes that grow darker when Hannibal meets his gaze, as Adam smiles. A low purr emanates from the omega's chest.

"Are things faring better at home?" When Adam doesn't respond to the soft admonishment, Hannibal re-crosses his legs. "I imagine you know by now that I am both unwilling and unable to give you what you've come here for. It would not only be an ethical violation of my profession to engage you sexually but a crime as you're married."

Adam ducks his head but continues to purr.

"I would, however, be willing to gentle you for our session, if there is nothing in particular you wish to discuss."

The omega is silent as he sits cross-legged on the ground between Hannibal's thighs. To Hannibal's pleasure, the omega allows his head to be moved easily under Hannibal's hands. Hannibal tilts it first right and then left, exposing a long sweep of neck where the silver-white bite mark of his bonding scar flashes. Hannibal runs the pads of his fingers gently over it, pressing his thumb into its center. He's rewarded with a sweet, low moan.

He doesn't bother to suppress the knot of desire rising in his stomach as the omega becomes more vocal. Nor does he stop Adam from resting his forehead against the inside of his thigh to inhale his scent. He runs his thumbs up the center of the omega's neck, towards his ears. Adam turns his head and sighs. When he turns back, Hannibal's slacks are damp with tears.

"Tell me," Hannibal says.

“It’s just been a while since I’ve been gentled. Months.”

“That’s really much too long. There’s no shame in stating your desires to your partner. Or what you need. In fact, I wholeheartedly encourage it.” Hannibal presses his fingernails lightly against the omega’s scalp behind his ears, which produces a high, needy whine. The knot of desire low in his stomach pulses at the sound.

He wonders if Will would ever let himself be touched like this.

After the session, as Hannibal walks Adam back to the front door, the omega turns to him with wet eyes. “Thanks, Dr. Lecter. I-well . . . It was really nice to be asked. So, thanks.”

Hannibal is still purring when he finds Will in the study. The omega is sitting in a haphazard fashion on the red bergère before the fireplace, a book between his hands.

He’s clad in one of Hannibal’s t-shirts and a pair of his boxers. One long, muscled thigh drapes over the edge of an armrest. The fireplace is alight, as Will prefers, and a handful of blankets are spread across his lap to spill onto the rug below.

When Hannibal walks in the room, Will’s eyes flick briefly to his face and then to his groin, where the remnant of Hannibal’s erection still lingers.

Will turns back to the book. “Woodward left. He was quite a mess.”

Hannibal pauses as he reaches for the voice recorder on the desk. “Woodward was a mess?”

Will makes a noise like a *tsk* against his teeth. “No, not Woodward. Your patient.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. He walked in emoting just about everything they have a name for and left horny and sad. Rough.” His eyes return to Hannibal’s groin.

Hannibal pockets the voice recorder. “Were you in here when he arrived?”

“As instructed.”

“What was he feeling?”

Will looks at him. His eyes skip across Hannibal’s face for a few seconds before they settle on the downward curve of his lip.

Will frowns back. “Whatever you scented, I guess. Smugness. Fear. Boredom. Desperation. Restlessness—no.” He shakes his head, sticking a thumbnail between his teeth. “Not restlessness. Um, anxiety, I think, but the type that comes when thinking about something you’ve done in the past. It wasn’t that strong. Hope, confusion. A little resignation, a little malice.” Will tips his head back and looks to the left, to memory. “Something maybe like anticipation, but that could have been the hope. They’re too similar for me to tell sometimes. I think that’s it. Why, what did you get from him?”

Something is alive and writhing in Hannibal's chest. "Fear."

Will looks at him for a long moment. "What, that's it?"

"The fear could have included anxiety, desperation, and confusion. But I only scented fear. Did you ever speak to Dr. Chilton about this?"

"About what?"

Remarkable, stunning creature. He's both blazing and cold in turns, mild interest turning to agitation as Hannibal smiles. The desire knotting his stomach gathers heat until he falls like a stone into the chair by his desk. "Does Dr. Chilton know you're capable of identifying so many emotions by scent?"

"I *assume* so."

Hannibal holds up a hand as Will begins to glower. "Fear," he says, pressing his thumb to his palm. "Anger," he continues and lowers his index finger. "Happiness, sadness, desire. Those are the emotions alphas and omegas are typically capable of scenting from each other." When Will only continues to frown, Hannibal says, "And some sister emotions, as it were, felt strongly enough – frustration or annoyance for anger, joy for happiness, extreme discomfort or unease for fear. But even then, they are little different than their pillar scents. You are special indeed, Will Graham."

Will scowls.

They make a game of it.

Will sits unobtrusively at a barstool in the kitchen or in the study with a book as Hannibal leads his patient into his office. Hannibal retrieves his phone from his pocket, glances at it, and places it next to him on his desk with a small, apologetic smile his patients rarely notice.

Will texts, *Heartbroken, mostly.*

Will texts, *Determination/decision, unhappiness (not sadness), exhaustion. Maybe also grateful or relieved?*

Or, *Placid/indifferent.*

Or, to Hannibal's thrill, *Yikes. Uh. You know that not-noise that's left behind when the furnace kicks off? Whatever emotion that is.*

It had been *suicidal ideation*, though Hannibal paints it with deft strokes into *morbid depression* and *inconsolable sadness* when he speaks to Will about it.

Hannibal is standing by Will next to the fireplace in the study when he recounts the session and only just hears Will's slight inhale. He might have missed it entirely, had the fire been higher on the logs. The mild hum Will gives in response sounds much like *you're lying*.

For the first time, Hannibal wonders if *deceit* is an emotion and, if so, how often he smells of it.

* * * * *

Less than a week later, Hannibal is considering Frederick's office from one of the avocado green armchairs.

On his last visit, the good doctor's desk had been devoid of anything but a few writing instruments, an office-style telephone, and a handful of poorly organized papers. Now, an elegant wooden in-tray is perched on one corner, cocked at a pleasing angle. Next to it is a wooden pen holder filled with a variety of pens, pencils, and highlighters. A small blossoming succulent sits near a much more modern phone.

The bookshelf tucked in one corner no longer holds sagging storage boxes but a variety of appropriately mediocre knickknacks. There's a dark stone hewn into the approximate shape of Atlas bore low by the weight on his back. Beside it is another plant, perhaps made of silk. Beside that, there's an abstract cube standing precariously on one corner atop a fake wooden platform.

The last time Hannibal had seen Frederick, the beta had sat low in a creaking office chair, one finger pressed to his mouth as he'd watched Hannibal's assessment of his office in silence.

Hannibal tilts his head. Surely Frederick's esteem must be moored on firmer ground than Hannibal's quiet judgment.

"God, you're arrogant," Will mutters. "Better guess is a recent or upcoming audit. Or he got a raise."

Frederick pauses shuffling papers atop his desk to look at them.

Hannibal grins. "What gave me away?"

Will has been in a feisty, agitated mood all morning, shooting barbs and anxious glances at Hannibal since he'd woke. Hannibal has done little to relieve the omega's tension, enchanted as he always is by the depth of Will's emotions. He'd only relented in the car, just as Will's fear had peaked, to avoid giving Frederick the satisfaction of claiming that homing Will had been a mistake, should the omega walk in reeking of distress. Will had furiously swiped at the comforting hand Hannibal laid across the back of his neck, but it had settled him for the remainder of the trip.

"In sequence, doctor?" Will tips his head back against the armchair. He puts a thumbnail between his teeth "The sudden lack of anything. Not that you ever really *give* anything, but sometimes you do, when it's not important. So, that would be surprise. Mild determination. That's when you looked around the room more carefully. Curiosity. Pleasure mixed with just enough condescension. *Could all this be my doing?*" Will rolls his head towards Hannibal and flashes him a smile sharp with teeth. "Right? That's what you thought, isn't it?"

"Clever boy."

“That is uncanny,” Frederick says. “What *was* that, Mr. Graham? Is it similar to what you do with Matthew?”

Will rolls his head back towards the ceiling. He grunts around his thumb.

“Dr. Lecter, you should have seen those two. Mr. Graham, I mean, and one of our orderlies. It was as though they were tied by some otherworldly psychological tether. Whenever they were together, *oh*, it was magnificent. Matthew is a rather . . . well, a rather uncomplicated young fellow, in truth, but they too had those same near-silent exchanges.” He offers Will a half-fond, half-exasperated smile. “You always were so opposed to being studied.”

Something hot and wet roils in Hannibal’s gut. He shifts in his chair.

“*Vengeance*, Hannibal?” Will whispers, though there’s no chance Frederick can’t hear him. “Are you serious? Get ahold of yourself.”

“Vengeance, I do say!” Frederick cups his hands together over the scatter of papers on his desk. “*What*, exactly, is vengeance?”

Frederick doesn’t lean forward over his clasped hands, though it’s far too easy for Hannibal to imagine the restraint it takes. The few feet that separate him from Will Graham are, after all, the closest Frederick Chilton will ever get to personal glory.

Will blinks, inhales, and one side of his mouth curves down into a wry smile. “Especially if you’re waxing poetic.”

Frederick’s hands flutter. “*Waxing poe*-of all things! Really, gentlemen, I must insist-“

“You are already aware of Will’s enhanced abilities,” Hannibal says. “*The proditor*, as it were.”

Will turns his head towards Hannibal with a whisper of a frown. Frederick twitches towards his hands.

“It has recently come to our attention that Will possesses additional abilities. Ones he mistakenly took to be the natural consequence of his gender.”

“You don’t say.”

“Will can, of course, detect each of the pillar scents. He can also detect every other emotion a person is experiencing in a given moment. Immediately and simultaneously.”

Frederick blinks. “Every other-“

“And,” Hannibal continues, pride swelling, “with such precision and intuitiveness that, as you witnessed here and with your orderly, it rises to an imperfect but effective form of near-silent communication.”

Frederick slumps in his chair. “*Mind reading*.”

“No, not *mind reading*,” Will snaps. “Jesus, Hannibal. It’s deductive reasoning. The same thing I used to do for the FBI, but, you know, stronger. Easier.” He waves a hand at Frederick. “You’ve seen me do it, like, a half-dozen times out in the field.”

Frederick presses a palm flat against his chest. “So then, can you-“

Will shakes his head. “It’s pretty weak with most betas, I think. I don’t really know. I’ve never really . . . tested it.” He inhales. “All I can smell is Hannibal right now.”

Frederick’s head is still tilted towards Will, but his eyes cut to Hannibal.

“No,” Will says.

Hannibal imagines how Will might describe the scents he’s letting bleed into the room. How they might be swirling around the omega, laying claws and hooks into his skin. The wet swipe of Will’s mouth as he winces and writhes under their combined clutch, his back arched into beautiful submission.

Superiority – and a gross amount of it. Really, Hannibal? It’s not even your ability!

Or, Um, you know, desire or whatever.

Or, Get a grip, doctor, is that affection you’re feeling?

“Oh,” Will breathes.

Frederick’s emotional barometer wiggles. “‘Oh?’ Why ‘oh?’” Without waiting for an answer, he presses a button on the telephone on his desk. It spits back static. “Matthew, please join me in my office.”

Will makes the little grunting sound again.

“Gentlemen, certainly you understand the magnitude of this discovery. Enhanced abilities typically run the sludging course of better-than-average cook or startlingly attractive. But *this*. Oh, Mr. Graham, the psychiatric community must know of it. I’m sure even Dr. Lecter-” Frederick pauses as his eyes slide to Hannibal. He leans back in his chair and smooths his tie. “Well, yes, perhaps not at this very moment. But I have something near an ethical obligation to observe your gift, Mr. Graham, and if you are unwilling to indulge in your homing alpha’s emotionality, well, really, you’ve left me with little choice.”

“Hannibal is very seriously weighing the pros and cons of hitting you.”

At Hannibal’s tepid smile, Frederick’s mouth pops open with an audible sound. “*Is he now?* And how is it you reached that conclusion?” He fumbles at the cup on his desk for a pen and flips over one of the papers. “Please, do not hold anything back.”

Will inhales when Hannibal cocks his head, permitting *disdain* to leak from his pores.

Will snorts. “Seriously.”

Hannibal's resulting smile fades as the office door opens and Matthew pokes his head inside. "Dr. Chilton-oh. Oh. Hello, everyone."

Hannibal watches Matthew zero in on Will. Will smiles a soft, warm smile at the lean beta and Matthew smiles back with an ease that makes the piano wire tremble. The men stare at each other for a long moment and in it, Hannibal sees at once how potently Frederick's fascination with them had taken root.

Matthew offers no more than a few small twitches of emotion: a raised eyebrow, a half-blind glance at Hannibal or Frederick, the clench of his fingers around the edge of the partially opened door, all of it reflected neatly in the way Will's fingers jump against the armrest of his chair. Will's offerings are much more noticeable, if not more cryptic, as the men sink into the roil of their mutual tether.

Hannibal's emotions are sequestered neatly in the depths of his abdomen, but he still feels an urge to frown. There's a micro-expression, a twitch at Matthew's eye and lip suggesting unhappiness, and Will opens his palms in response. The orderly grins and Will grins back. A similar twitch at Will's shoulder causes the orderly's gaze to drop to the ground in some amalgam of embarrassment and coquettishness. Matthew clicks his tongue and Will rolls his eyes.

Hannibal feels a burn alongside his temple in the shape and weight of Frederick's stare.

"Matthew, please join us," Frederick says. "We wish to witness a demonstration of Mr. Graham's abilities. I intend to ask him to list the emotions you may currently be feeling and ask that you inform us whether they have been accurately identified. Understood?"

"Uh, sure, I guess," Matthew says. He meets Hannibal's eyes and Hannibal inclines his head.

Good beta.

Will exhales heavily as they all turn to look at him. "No. Absolutely not."

Frederick raises an eyebrow at Hannibal.

"You've already acknowledged Will has historically declined to be studied," Hannibal says, the accompanying and *I will be the omega's only exception to that rule* remaining tucked behind his teeth. He tilts his eyebrows up at Will and curls one side of his mouth until his expression is appropriately rueful. "Though I must admit, I'd cherish the opportunity to show off your talents."

Will's eyes dart quickly to Frederick and Matthew before returning to Hannibal. There's a half-amused tilt to his mouth, like he believes Hannibal might be playing a joke on him. For his part, Hannibal remains still, silent, embracing the angry chorus of his instincts as they shout about poorly behaved omegas and suggest all manner of punishments best suited to the crime. Slowly, so slowly that Hannibal must focus on the omega's wide mouth to see it, Will's smile begins to fade.

When Will continues to stare, Hannibal takes a subtle but pointed glance around the room. It's a reminder of where Will is – where he might stay – should Hannibal's whims dictate. Will's smile returns briefly, incredulously, before disappearing altogether.

Hannibal waits for Will's eyebrows to mash together or for his fingers to skim across his palms. He inhales, ready to detect the fire and brimstone of Will's fury. Instead, Will's gaze drops to Hannibal's tie.

Will stays still for a long moment before closing his eyes with a soft wince. "Yeah, okay. All right." He inhales slowly. "So, uh, I can detect nervousness, or, really, uncertainty. Or, no, but like, uncertainty kind of modified by anticipation of the unknown." Matthew frowns, hesitates, and then nods. "Joyous surprise." A nod. "Wariness tinged with terror." A nod accompanied by a quick glance at Hannibal. "Contentment." Nod. "Excitement. Anticipation – but not the uncertain anticipation, a happy anticipation." Nod. "Worry, concern." Nod, nod. "Um, sorry, Matty, but jealousy. Uh, you know, desire. Longing. Confusion. Righteousness." Matthew is nodding. "Three – three? – yeah, three different flavors or types or whatever of anxiety and about a half-dozen of fear, most of which I think I've mentioned."

Frederick leans slowly back into his chair. "Did you say *six* different types of fear?"

Will looks at Matthew, who shrugs. "Maybe not fear. Concern or general anxiety? I mean, obviously all types of fear aren't the same. The fear you have for someone else is different than the fear you have for yourself. The fear you have because you might, I don't know, get fired is different than the fear you won't make it to the grocery store on time. Or I assume so. I haven't really been around anyone-haven't experienced those things since--"

"Indeed," Frederick says. "What a fascinating creature you are, Mr. Graham."

Soon after, the beta ushers Will out of the office to attend a group therapy session. Hannibal tightens his emotions against the half-panicked, half-furious look Will shoots back at him just before he disappears around the edge of Frederick's office door.

The look calms the worst of Hannibal's torment. Hannibal can almost picture the way Will might, just maybe seek physical reassurance when Hannibal retrieves him. He imagines Will's mounting tension as he's led into the heart of the institute, far past where he has any hope of walking out on personal autonomy alone. Fear rising, tension rising, only to find Hannibal waiting for him. The sugary sweet scent of his relief. Will is still so young to his instincts, so unsure of himself and well, what else can he do but direct his fear and uncertainty at a strong, capable alpha willing to embrace his desires? He might even *attack* – lunge at Hannibal with his teeth bared and his fingers curved into claws, only to have Hannibal dominate, control, overpower, and force Will to acknowledge his physical superiority.

Hannibal can almost taste it. It tastes like exaltation.

"I'd consider adjusting your expression, Frederick," Hannibal says, picking a piece of lint off his crossed knee. "You know as well as I do that the Omegan Welfare Protection Act no longer provides institute directors with unfettered discretion to ship their wards off for study."

Frederick shoots him a withering look. “Yes, and I have you to thank for that particular bit of legislation, don’t I?”

“Myself and Dr. Bloom, yes.”

Frederick stacks the pile of papers on his desk with enough force to bend them. “Well, if there’s nothing else-“

“What is the nature of the relationship between Will and the orderly?”

Several emotions cross Frederick’s face – worry, annoyance, arrogance, resignation – before he settles on a sly, bemused expression that looks much the way Hannibal knows *schadenfreude* feels. “Whatever do you mean?”

Hannibal remains silent.

Frederick’s smile spreads a little and then turns cruel as the beta replaces the papers onto his desk. “They are friendly, of course, as you can see. Matthew has been a most helpful asset for the institute during Will’s heats.”

“You sent a beta orderly to tend to a ward’s heat?”

“Goodness, no, of course not,” Frederick says. He pauses. “Ah, well not intentionally. I’m sure you’ve read Will’s file. I happen to know it’s quite detailed on this particular point, as legal *insisted*. The poor thing is intractable during his heats. We have so few omegas here in active heat and Mr. Graham is . . . well, he’s violent, Hannibal. *Physically* violent.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Frederick snaps. “Not only to himself, but any soul unfortunate enough to cross his path. Never *mind* the extensive repairs we’ve had to do to his room, tearing it apart like he does.” Frederick takes a deep breath and cups his hands on his desk to look at Hannibal. “Matthew calms him.”

Hannibal nods around a blinding ache in his gut.

“Despite Mr. Graham’s-“ Frederick tilts his head back and forth like a parakeet, searching for the right word “-predilections, as they are, he is at heart a truly affectionate creature with a select few, Matthew and Dr. Bloom among them. Peter, too. And Dr. Bloom tells me he owned a whole gaggle of mutts before he presented, so do with that whatever you will.”

“Peter?”

Frederick gives him a scathing look. “Goodness, you alphas are all alike, aren’t you? Unapologetically possessive. Yes, *Peter*. Peter Bernardone, one of our residents. The victim of a traumatic brain injury suffered in his youth. It’s made homing him all but an impossibility, of course, though he’s easy enough to manage. I have the distinct impression Mr. Graham views him as a substitute for one of his dogs.” Frederick sniffs. “Pets his hair the way one might a pup, anyway.”

Hannibal hums.

Frederick glances at him. Whatever he sees in Hannibal's expression, it's enough to cup his hands back over the papers.

"Certainly you know how these things go, Hannibal. Omegas, betas, alphas, *humans*, we form bonds with those in our most immediate vicinity. Affections often develop by proximity alone." Frederick shrugs. "I see Mr. Graham is as surly and disagreeable with you as he is with most people. The fact that you appear to find his antics *amusing* is likely the reason you two have developed whatever attachments you have." He pauses. "That or Stockholm syndrome."

Hannibal rises from the armchair. "There's no need to be crass, Frederick. Or envious."

Frederick makes a noncommittal noise. "Yes, well, I'd recommend telling Mr. Graham *no* and seeing how accommodating he remains." He gestures towards the open office door. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment."

Hannibal leaves Frederick's office and makes his way back to the institute's visitor's lounge. He settles himself in one of the dreary, overstuffed chairs lining the room to wait for Will to finish his therapy session. He swallows down bile.

His instincts are ceaseless, as they have been the last few weeks. Cataloguing and prioritizing his next meals, ranking them by ease and pleasure of the hunt. Tittering about bits of flesh and morsels of organs, teasing and poking at Hannibal's open wounds.

First among his intended is Frederick Chilton. The new assistant manager at the bodega around the corner from Hannibal's office who'd had the nerve to offer him a substandard cut of beef tongue without so much as a batted eye is a close second. The beta orderly is a closer third.

Adam. Hannibal considers, unsure whether he wants to take Adam to bed or slay him for being the impudent, foolhardy creature he is.

One of his less developed instincts tentatively offers Peter's name, though Hannibal quashes the thought at once. Never children. Or adults with the capacities of children.

One of his duller instincts offers Alana, which doesn't merit a response. Never her. Never his sweet Alana Bloom.

Jack Crawford.

Now *there's* an interesting thought. Out in the fields at various crime scenes, it had been easy to submit to Jack's aggressive, alphan excesses, born more from irrationality and teenage-like bullying than anything of substance. The alpha would forever come storming up the side of a hill or across mosh-like wetlands, already prepared to challenge whatever fool stood first in his way. The more seasoned alphas in the crowd would slip quietly to the edges of the crime scene, the younger ones closer, their chests swelling and their spines lengthening at the thought of rising to Jack's challenge.

It was always Hannibal who would stride towards Jack as the fuming alpha breathed and growled like a sickened bull. He would submit to Jack in a quiet, dignified way that kept everyone on track and made him integral to the team.

Until, of course, talk arose of an unfriendly beta with an eye for killers; a beta who fought back against Jack but would never – could never – challenge Jack the way the alpha wanted. Who Jack wouldn't dare hurt. And Will Graham had slowly but surely pushed the FBI's regular use for Hannibal to the back burner.

Which had been fine, in the end. It meant Hannibal could turn his attention back to his practice. And he wasn't sure he could have stopped himself from taking Will right there, on the outskirts of his own crime scene and in full sight of the carnage within, had he heard the omega speak the words he spoke to the reporter.

Remarkable. Beautiful. Masterful.

A commotion in the hallway draws his attention to the here and now. He hears a growl and the shuffling of fabric and papers. "Now wait just one goddamn minute!"

"As we've already explained--"

Another growl, more shuffling, and a group of people come around the bend in the hallway – two orderlies and Jack Crawford, as though summoned by Hannibal's thoughts alone.

Jack twists out of the orderlies' grasp. The mountainous stack of folders held between his arms tips precariously. The top one slips. One of the orderlies catches it.

"Christ al-fucking-mighty." With no hands free to scramble at his hoard, Jack uses his upper arms to gather the files into a semblance of order. He glares at the orderly as she replaces the file before looking around the room. "Oh! Dr. Lecter. Good. And thanks to you, too," he shouts at the orderlies as they move on down the hallway. "I take it Dr. Chilton called you about the Panty Bandit? The little weasel."

"As a matter of fact, no."

Jack grunts. "A conference room," he barks to the woman sitting behind the plexiglass at the other end of the waiting area. "For Dr. Lecter and me."

His instincts offer Jack's name again. Hannibal concedes.

The windowless room holds nothing but a steel conference table and a handful of chairs. Jack tips the folders onto the table in a heap and sits heavily, wincing as he does. "Christ, it's been a hell of a month."

"I'd imagine so, with a panty bandit of all unseemly things on the prowl."

Jack sighs, rubbing his hands hard across his face. Hannibal can hear the scratch of the alpha's stubble, two or three days old. When Jack leans back in his chair, Hannibal takes in the rest of his appearance with a quick, practiced eye: crumpled and stained suit, wrinkled

undershirt, tie loose, and collar undone. There are not just bags under Jack's eyes but puffy swollen mounds that he rubs at roughly with one hand.

"I don't mean this unkindly, Jack, but you look exhausted."

Jack grunts again. "If it turns out I've slept more than a hundred hours total in the past thirty days, I'll eat my suit. I'd appreciate your help, here."

Hannibal's instincts nudge Jack's name above the bodega owner's. He checks his watch. "I'm afraid I don't have more than fifteen minutes to spare, though I'd be happy to offer whatever I may until then."

"You could start by reminding Dr. Chilton that when he agrees to something, he goddamn better well stick to it unless he wants the FBI on his bad side." Jack reaches for a file. He turns it over to read the label before placing it back on the table. He picks up another before gesturing at the rest with an open hand. "It's PB one and two and FRA one through four. Help me sort, would you?"

Hannibal begins sorting. He keeps Jack's face in his periphery to ensure the alpha gives nothing away in his expression as he says, "How odd. Frederick only just excused me from his office by claiming he had another appointment. He refused to see you?"

"Yep," Jack says. "Well, kind of. He didn't really *want* to see me at all. But with Will Graham out of the game and you taking on more patients, I'm dead out of options. Chilton's the best we have. Unfortunately."

"Have you considered Alana Bloom?"

"She's not interested." Jack cocks an eyebrow. "Any chance you are?"

"No," Hannibal says, giving Jack a small smile. "Though I will say that Frederick's newfound reluctance to step into the limelight is unsurprising. And, if you'll forgive my bluntness, that may be a good thing for the Bureau. I can't imagine his assistance would be quite as meaningful without Will nearby to bounce ideas off of."

One of Jack's hands slows as he reaches for the last file – *FRA No. 3*. "Yeah, about that. I'd heard you'd homed Will. I'm not thrilled, to be honest, considering how much I told you about him. And what I said during my last appointment."

"I assume you're referring to the fact you believe Will is dangerous." Hannibal leans back in his chair. Jack's face is bowed over the folders now stacked neatly on the table, though Hannibal can't say whether it's an unintentional gesture or one meant specifically to keep Hannibal from reading his face. "You seemed certain when you said it. So certain, in fact, that you shared those feelings with Will himself. One might argue you are now *more* certain."

Jack opens the topmost file from the stack – *FRA No. 1* – and rifles through the pages. He shrugs as he removes a manilla folder from its depths before exchanging it for *PB No. 1* from which he retrieves a similar folder. "Yeah, well, things change."

“Such as?” When Jack hesitates, Hannibal permits a little irritation to leak into his voice. “Since I am currently homing Will, any insights you could offer into his state of mind would be appreciated.”

Jack taps at one of the folders with a beefy, blunted finger. “Look, if we could—”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re right.”

There it is, Hannibal thinks, just as Jack’s gaze snaps to his face. Hannibal keeps his expression relaxed and shuttered as the other alpha makes a quick circuit of his expression with coal black irises.

Carefully, slowly, Jack asks, “What makes you say that?”

Hannibal shrugs with a quick, self-deprecating smile. “Call it instinct.” He tilts his head a little to one side, granting Jack a clean view of his neck. *Vulnerable, submissive*. “At times, I am certain there’s a darkness in Will that lingers just below surface, almost close enough to touch. Other days, I wonder if it’s all he can do to keep it dormant.”

Jack’s eyes are unreadable. He runs the pad of his index finger against the edge of a folder. If pressed, Hannibal couldn’t say with certainty what combination of scents and gestures ultimately gives Jack away, though Hannibal knows with blistering, furious clarity that the words that follow are lies.

“I used to think the same thing,” Jack finally says. “I’ve had a chat with Bloom about it since. A few chats, actually. I don’t think I told you, but I was there when Will presented. Turns out it was a perfect storm type situation. I was on the brink of cracking a case, had just lost my best asset, so on and so on. I, uh, I got some things confused for a while. It’s fine, now. I’m fine, I mean.” He grins. “Will’s always been a bit of a hellion, but a couple of scrap-ups with some alphan assholes doesn’t make him dangerous. Not, you know, not with everything that’s happened. His life changing and all.”

Hannibal suppresses a frown.

“So, he’s good then? Will, I mean. Concerns of . . . of darkness aside, everything’s good?”

Hannibal feigns hesitation long enough for Jack to look up.

If Jack refuses to divulge why he believes Will is dangerous, Hannibal can find other uses for him. In fact, there’s every likelihood that Jack’s refusal will make him more willing to open up about other aspects of Will. And Hannibal is, after all, still a starving, bottomless pit where information about the omega is concerned.

Jack isn’t the only one capable of emotional gamesmanship.

Hannibal nudges his own pawn across the board.

It takes a little cajoling. Hannibal must mimic Jack’s small frown, cross and then re-cross his legs, tap his fingernails against the steel tabletop. He furrows his brow, but only slightly – enough to convey the suggestion of inner tumult without the risk of revealing his hand.

Jack doesn't disappoint.

"If he's being difficult, that's just Will. He was like that—" Jack clears his throat. "He was like that *before*. He's a little asshole sometimes."

"I have the impression you knew Will better than most, at least in the past few years." Hannibal pauses again in feigned hesitation, tapping his fingers against the table. "What happened when he presented?"

Jack leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. He looks down at his hands. "It's not a story that does me any favors."

"As I said, any insights at all would be helpful."

Jack sighs. "It was just him and me and he was being a temperamental shit about something. We were out in the field, up by Druid Hill where we'd found a body. He was whining and pouting about something, and I'd been fighting with Bella, and *Christ*, I didn't want to deal with him. So, I started . . . raising my voice, you know. Yelling. And Will, at first he took it like he normally does, but then he got all odd and laid down in the middle of the *goddamn crime scene*, getting blood—he contaminated the scene is what he did, and I—" Jack sighs again. "Well, I smelled it."

"Will had gone into heat."

"Yes, goddammit," Jack says. "And I was devastated, you know? That was my first thought. Devastated because I was about to lose my most precious weapon."

"Jack—"

"No," Jack snaps. "Don't. Lord knows I need to tell someone. Might help me sleep tonight." He rubs at the puffy mounds under his eyes with a wince. "Okay, so, there I am, being an asshole myself, already losing it at the thought Will was fucking omegan, and it took me a minute to collect myself, okay? But when I did . . . Dr. Lecter, I'm about to lose Bella to cancer. My father died when I was fifteen. But the look on Will's face when he realized what was happening, realized he was going into heat? God, man, I knew right then I have not and will never know the meaning of the word devastated."

Hannibal's hand twitches. The desire to ball it into a fist is there in his fingertips, as present and tightly coiled as the piano wire. This isn't Jack as Hannibal knows him. This isn't Jack at all. At best, at its absolute finest, the man across the table is a weak, flickering afterimage of the Jack Crawford of Hannibal's memory. The man that arrived at crime scenes with guns blazing is such a far cry from the deflated, overweight alpha scratching at his stubble that Hannibal wants to avert his eyes in shame. Even during their therapy sessions, where Jack was most prone to revealing brief flashes of vulnerability, he'd still remained guarded. He'd spend most of their hour in silence, carefully picking through his verbal repertoire and emotions while spinning his hat in his hands.

Now, he's leaking like a damaged valve.

But what broke him?

Hannibal's response is careful. "I can't imagine how difficult that must have been to witness." He waits until Jack nods before he continues. "Did Will enjoy working for the FBI?"

"He liked saving people, I can tell you that. He still could, you know."

For the first time in his life, Hannibal feels the unpleasant urge to roll his eyes. He fights a smile as well. He must be spending too much of his time in the exclusive company of Will, the sneering, brooding beauty he is. What Hannibal had mistaken in Jack for exhausted determination had been little more than base manipulation: he wants Will's assistance with a case.

As predictable as always, Jack touches the topmost file. "Got a hell of a case right now. Two, actually."

Hannibal allows himself a small sigh as he reaches for the folder Jack holds out to him.

"Remember that string of arsons we had a few months back, the ones that stopped after the Falls Road fires that burned half of Roland Park? Well, we think the Falls Road Arsonist may be the same guy who's been strangling all those middle-aged women with their own drawers. The, uh, the Panty Bandit, as he's now known, courtesy of Freddie Lounds." Jack hands Hannibal the second folder, and Hannibal opens both on the table. "Witnesses peg both men between the ages of 30 and 50, average height, average build, and—"

"Jack, you've just described the archetypical adult man."

"—and," Jack says, jabbing at the photographs stapled to the inside covers of the folders, both of which display a map with a series of handwritten Xs in red marker, "within three days of the last fire, the Bandit started striking in the area around Roland Park. In fact, it's the only place he's struck since."

"But there have been no additional fires?" Hannibal asks. Jack nods. "Do arsonists typically change MOs so drastically?"

"Not typically, no. But it's our best working theory."

The files suddenly feel warm, as though they're vibrating themselves into a frenzy by Hannibal's touch alone. His instincts perk up, as they always do in the face of something unique or interesting. He cannot say what, precisely, causes them to stir except that he too feels some shift in the air. He almost smiles. "Have you released this information to the press? I very much doubt our arsonist would want to be confused as the . . . bandit if he is indeed not"

"That's the plan."

"I'll certainly ask Will to take a look."

“Great,” Jack says, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. “Maybe I can get more than three hours of motherfucking sleep tonight.”

Hannibal bids Jack farewell a few minutes later, the files tucked under his arm. Their parting handshake is a little too rough, Jack’s expression a little too guarded as Hannibal turns towards the conference room door. A pleasurable thrill taps at his chest as he makes his way down the corridor and back to the waiting room. If Jack insists on keeping his cards close to his chest, Hannibal can bide his time. It matters little. What keeps the pleasure thrumming and elicits sweet purrs from his instincts is the knowledge that Jack is *absolutely certain* Will is dangerous. And the fact that Hannibal is almost as certain the files will show him a sliver of that danger.

He can't say the form it'll take, of course, though he's happy to let his mind wander. Perhaps Will might express some pleasure in what the Falls Road Arsonist has done. Perhaps he'd find *beauty* in the destruction . . . just as he'd found beauty in the work Hannibal's hands had once created. Over dinner that night, perhaps Hannibal will mention the Chesapeake Ripper and finally know whether Will's pupils shrink or blow wide at his name.

He's smiling when he pauses at the gate between the final curve of the hallway and the waiting room for the quarter-wit manning it to take notice of him. Before he steps through, he hears his name called from behind him.

“Dr. Lecter?”

The pleasure wilts a little. Matthew stands in the hallway, a little back from the open gate. There’s a quiet dignity in the way he looks at Hannibal, as though he’s observing Hannibal with as much interest as Hannibal is observing him. When Hannibal cocks his head, the orderly blinks but remains silent.

They walk down one hallway and another, Hannibal content to remain a few steps behind, the orderly happy to lead. Past two locked doors and a third comprised of metal bars, where they pause to wait for the nearby guard to grant them entry.

Hannibal remains silent, as does the beta.

Finally, they stop halfway down a fourth corridor, before a wide mirror set deeply into the gray stone wall. When Matthew turns to Hannibal, his face holds the same calm, quiet intensity, though it’s beginning to wilt a little at its edges.

“Is there something you wish to say?” Hannibal takes a pointed look around the corridor. “Or show me?”

The orderly’s voice is deep but quiet. It holds notes of betrayal. “You shouldn’t have told Dr. Chilton about Will’s extra abilities.”

“Oh?”

The corners of the beta’s mouth tick down, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, he presses a button at the side of the mirror. Hannibal recognizes the stuttering, shimmery way the mirror

fades until it reveals the room beyond. It's the same technology that had permitted him and Frederick to view the gaggle of omegas through the one-way glass in the observatory's wall.

The small room holds a single table and two chairs. Hannibal can't help but smile at the sight.

Will is sitting in one of the chairs, stretched petulantly across the table, loose-boned and insolent in his refusal to engage the rather austere beta across from him. The beta holds her spine in an uncomfortably straight line as though willing the omega to behave himself by suggestion alone.

Matthew presses another button. Noise spills into the corridor.

"Mr. Graham--"

Will groans. "C'mon, Jules, please? Everything's fine. I just want to go home."

Possessiveness rears its head at the casual, almost friendly way Will says the beta's name. Frederick's words are back in his head. *We all tend to form bonds with those in our immediate vicinity.*

It takes his instincts roaring to life with pleased cries for him to think *home*.

Will wants to go *home*.

To the *manor*.

Hannibal huffs quietly. Matthew's eyes dart to him.

On the other side of the mirror, Jules sighs. "It's a handful of routine questions and then we'd be happy--"

"Okay, fine," Will snaps. "Fine. You tell me which law allows you to keep me locked in this room and I'll answer every question you've got."

"Mr. Graham--"

"*Jules*," Will spits back. "I don't want to answer any questions. I don't want to spend another second here. Just let me go."

Matthew turns towards the door and slips inside the room.

Hannibal ignores the way Will's entire body relaxes the moment he sees the orderly. With one hand on Will's shoulder, Matthew speaks quietly into his ear. Will rolls his eyes but rises from where he's been half-sprawled across the table to face the beta woman directly.

He bats softly at Matthew's hand. "Fine, fine. Okay. Let's get on with it."

Jules reads from a clipboard, a red pen in one hand. "Is your homing alpha providing you with food, water, a comfortable place to sleep, and other base necessities?"

Will crosses his arms over his chest. “Yes.”

“Is your homing alpha tending to your emotional needs?”

“What emotional needs?” Will asks but then shakes his head. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Mr. Graham.”

“Jules.”

The beta places the clipboard on the table. “Will. You know I have to do this. I don’t care what the answer is as long as you’re not being abused.”

Will softens a little. “I’m not. Things are fine. It’s been fine. Actually, it’s . . . it’s going pretty well.”

Matthew squeezes Will’s shoulder and turns to the door. Will’s eyebrows mash together as he watches Matthew leave. He pops a thumbnail between his teeth.

In the hallway and with the door closed behind him, the orderly looks at Hannibal with the same calm, intense expression.

Hannibal avoids his gaze for a moment. Only when he is sure he can meet the orderly’s eyes with absolute neutrality does he say, “I understand. Your omega will be returned to you unharmed.”

Matthew’s sigh smells like relief.

* * * * *

By the time Frederick Chilton leaves his office, the sky is streaked in wide fans of black and purple, dotted with a sparse scatter of stars. It’s only once he inhales the fresh air that the fervor of the day hits his skull like a drug.

He doesn’t hesitate as he jogs down the sweeping maw of the institute’s staircase, his phone already tight and hot in his fist. Nor does he hesitate outside his car, surrounded by the freshly plowed snow that rises in gray-black mounds around the edges of the parking lot.

He digs with fumbling fingers in his pocket for his keys.

It’s only when he’s seated in his car, his breath escaping him in small puffs, that he finds his thumb perched for a long moment over his contact list, reluctant to press down

He shakes his head, flexes his thumb, and dials.

The line doesn’t ring before a soft female voice says, “Who’s calling, please?”

“Frederick Chilton.”

“One moment.”

Frederick taps his fingers against the edge of the steering wheel and winces at the sound his nails make against the faux wood. He stuffs his hand between his thighs.

“Well, well, Dr. Chilton,” Abel Gideon says in that slow, creeping way that always rushes water through Frederick’s veins. “I must say, I was just *not* expecting to hear from you again. Tell me, to what do I owe this rather dubious pleasure?”

“Abel, look-“

“Oh, how delightful. I believe you are just about to demand something. Let us hear.”

“You’ve never seen anything like him.”

“I recall you saying something rather similar about that Iranian girl. Oh, now, what was her name? I am so terrible with names. Sandy? Sanskrit?”

“S-Sama.”

“Yes, yes,” Abel says. “Sama. Sama, Sama, Sama. Ah, well, that was too bad really. Poor thing. Poor dear. But please, do tell me. Whatever is on offer?”

“Something worth fifty per cent more than the usual asking price.”

Abel clucks his tongue. “You are a greedy little piggy, aren’t you? If only you knew the number of strings I had to pull – and the expense, goodness me, let’s not forget the expense – of getting you this job. Ensuring you alone reign as king of your little omegan domain.” Abel lowers his voice. “Have you taken one of them in heat, yet? All those succulent little babies, ripe for the picking. I bet you have. Come now, your secret’s safe with me.”

Frederick says nothing. His stomach turns.

“Oh, you’re no fun. You used to be *fun*, Freddie.”

“Abel-“

Abel sighs. “Yes, yes. All right. Well, I suppose the price depends on whether it’s headed for study or for, shall we say, personal use? You know how my clients can be. Such a picky lot.”

“Either,” Frederick says. “One of your clients homed him recently. He might want him back.”

“Fine, fine, let’s hear it, then.”

Frederick begins where he always does. “Male, average height, brown hair, mid-thirties-“

“You’re failing to whet my appetite, doctor.”

“You remember how Sama could detect lies? Or-“

“Now, now, let’s not be hasty. She could *sort of* detect lies. Which was interesting, no doubt. No doubt. That is, of course, until she opened her mouth to say anything else. And my, my

did that girl enjoy the sound of her own voice. Criminal. Just criminal.”

Frederick grips the steering wheel, grounding himself with the whine of the leather twisting under his fingers. “Whatever it was, it’s a cheap parlor trick compared to what Will Graham can do. As close to mind reading as I’ve ever seen it. You’d make a fortune off him.” He pauses, hesitating. “If you can pry him from his alpha, that is.”

Abel’s hum, pleased and amused, is Frederick’s entire world. “Is that so?”

The Seedy Bar Off Charles Street

Chapter Summary

Hannibal takes Will to the grocery store. Alana pays a visit. Hannibal gets drunk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will is nearly vibrating in the foyer. He's already donned his coat and one of Hannibal's scarves with haphazard care, the tasseled edges of which are poking out between the buttons. Hannibal watches him lean against the front door, tapping his fingers on the heavy wood. Then, against the edge of the kitchen island, tapping the toe of his shoe against the ground.

Thwack, thwack, thwack.

By the time Hannibal goes to him, Will's constant fidgeting has culminated into a fine sheen of sweat along his temples and the upper curve of his lip not hidden behind scruff. Will has one of Hannibal's coats, a scarf, and a pair of leather driving gloves in hand and thrusts them out to Hannibal with an expression that makes Hannibal pause to scent the air.

Hannibal wrinkles his nose. "You smell of wet canine. Is this happiness, Will?"

Will shifts his weight and shakes the proffered clothing at Hannibal. "If you say so."

Typically stoic Will is atypically talkative on the way to the grocery store, filling the interior of the car with a litany of quick anecdotes and half-sentences.

"And I mean, what could she say?" Will laughs into the passenger side window. His breath leaves a frosted trail against the glass. "It's not like she didn't shoot the guy clear through the testicle, accident or not. And he *was* trying to shoot her at the time so, fair's fair, I guess. But that's not even the worst part. When Zeller found out it'd been Beverly specifically that had shot him, he actually – and I'll kill you if you ever mention it to Jack – he actually managed to collect the testicle before they buried the guy. It may or may not be suspended in acrylic on Beverly's desk."

"You jest, surely. And to think, she once told me it was the molted skin of some extinct animal. Jack doesn't know?"

"No, he does, but he'll lie through his teeth if you ask him about it."

Will laughs again and Hannibal consumes the sound. Will is talking expansively with his hands, raising them alongside the climax of a story and dropping them with a soft slap against his thighs with each denouement. To his pleasant surprise, Hannibal finds the

contours of Will's face alter pleasantly without the constant press of a glower or glare or gritted teeth. His features are transformed from hard-lined rock into the soft, delicate curves of turned earth.

Will falls silent as they pass an omegan school. The building is a soft, receded thing, set far back from the suburban road it abuts. Like its attendees, the brick and iron accoutrements are painted in airy colors of browns and beiges and blues, intended to bring to mind the beautiful, pale-eyed children it promises to turn into pliant spouses worthy of their gender.

"They don't really stop educating omegas once they present, do they?" Will asks with a soft flush. He presses one of his hands flat against the car window. "I've heard that omegan schools are more like finishing schools than regular ones. I've never really known any other omegas, though, except for the ones at the institute and they all kind of avoided me. I never thought to ask."

"You're not far off the mark," Hannibal says. "Omegan schools are indeed similar to finishing schools. The curriculum is heavily influenced by classes in deportment and social etiquette, with academics playing a minor, secondary role. Academically, omegas are still taught whatever may be necessary to tend to a household – to read and write recipe cards, schedule appointments, and so on. Enough to get their children through the first few years of school. A seventh- or eighth-grade education at most."

"Until puberty hits," Will says. He runs a fingernail along the curve of his skull, behind his left ear.

Neither of them has mentioned the small blue Greek omega symbol tattooed there, directly above where the institute implanted Will's homing chip. Hannibal has touched the mark with reverence more than once as Will sleeps, trying but failing to feel the electronic device beneath it. Avoiding the urge to remove it forcibly with his nails.

"Does it itch?" Hannibal asks. Will shakes his head. "So, omegas are taught to read and write, yes. Same with mathematics and science, though both are taught within the realms of cooking and cleaning. Solutions and mixtures. Cups and quarts and ounces. It's an oppressive system by nature, intended to–"

"–prevent me," Will says with a grin that exposes his canines.

Hannibal returns his smile.

When they pull into the parking lot of the grocery store, Will snorts. "I can't say I saw you shopping at a big box retailer for food, Dr. Lecter."

"It's certainly not my first instinct, but the few things I still need for our upcoming dinner party are here. And I imagine this abomination is precisely within *your* wheelhouse."

Hannibal expects Will's fleeting, sharp grin to return, finds himself hungry at the thought, and is disappointed when the omega ducks his head against a furious blush.

“Yeah, no, I know, and I’m sorry or whatever,” Will says. “*The Bountiful Duty* said-I know. Look, unless you really like fish, I’m not much of a cook.”

Hannibal resists the urge to press his fingers to his stomach. “The reigns of my kitchen are mine alone. Has Woodward not satisfied the rest?”

Will glowers. “He still doesn’t like me.”

“Woodward might surprise you. Unless, of course, you’d prefer to take on his duties.” When Will makes to grab at the door handle, Hannibal lightly touches his arm, pleased that although the omega’s muscles jump under his fingertips, he doesn’t pull away. “There’s one other matter we must discuss before we head inside.” From within an inner pocket of his coat, he removes a sleek, soft strip of leather.

“There’s literally no way,” Will says. “You’d have to kill me first.”

“I anticipated as much.” Hannibal turns the collar over in his palm until the fastening is upright. He points at the silver buckle which is snapped neatly in half. “I have no intention of being arrested today. I must insist you at least keep it in your pocket, in case you’re questioned. Collars break all the time, even upon the crest of errands.”

“*Upon the crest of errands*,” Will mocks back. He contemplates the leather strap for a moment before snatching it from Hannibal’s hand and pocketing it with force. “Fine.”

At once, the car heats with the scents of lemongrass and pepper – the soothing menthol burn of Will’s natural camphor growing warm and peaked. *Fear*, Hannibal notes at once, though it’s most likely some amalgam of anxiety and wariness. For professing, with the dramatic inclinations of a teenager, that Will would rather die than wear a collar. A collar which Hannibal knows would sit so beautifully against the soft sweep of his neck.

Will makes another grab for the door handle but freezes when Hannibal touches his arm again.

“Will.”

The omega jerks towards the car door. “*Jesus*, what?”

“Will,” Hannibal says again. “You now smell strongly of fear. It’s far from ideal for either of us to be in public like this. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Will fidgets in his seat. “I just . . . I forgot for a moment, that’s all.”

“Forgot.”

Will waves a hand at the grocery store, the asphalt parking lot, the space over the center console between him and Hannibal. “Yeah, I forgot for a minute what we’re doing here. Why we’re here. Why it’s you I’m here with, right now, and not back at home with the dogs. I just . . . forgot.”

Hannibal swallows the purr building in his larynx. “Should you want to leave the store, for whatever reason, you only need to say the word.”

Will snorts. “Yeah, okay, that’s fine.” He reaches for the door handle again but pauses to sneer. “May I leave the car now?”

Will is a chaotic shopper. The omega darts between the aisles, retrieving items for brief consideration for, Hannibal is certain, the sole pleasure of returning them where they don’t belong. He weaves his way through the other shoppers, scowling at those who impinge his flight while oblivious to the way he stands perfectly in the middle of each aisle so not a soul can pass without first calling his attention.

“Absolutely not,” Hannibal says as Will reaches for a plasticky package of confectionary goods. “I refuse anything called *Dinky-Dinks* in the manor. Is that supposed to be an onomatopoeia? You Americans are unusually fond of those.”

Will narrows his eyes as his hand continues to snake towards the package. “Are you asking if they make noise when you eat them?”

“I suppose not.” Hannibal is uncertain whether Will’s expression suggests a challenge or amusement as he touches the bag with an index finger. “A compromise?”

Will pauses, three fingers around the donuts. The way he glances up at Hannibal, his head bowed, his neck long and taut, the slight submission in the slump of his shoulder, all of it is beautifully, *achingly* omegan.

Will’s tongue darts to wet the outer corner of his lower lip. “Terms?”

“You submit to a haberdasher for an upcoming dinner party I have planned. With minimal complaint.”

Will’s eyes narrow further. “And?”

“I choose your socks.”

“*Haberdasher*,” Will repeats, scathing, and the package goes into the cart. “The socks for a six-pack of something carbonated.”

* * * * *

Hannibal unpacks the groceries while Will sits at the kitchen island, his head in his arms. “I drank too much soda.”

Hannibal retrieves a box of pasta and places it behind an identical package in the cupboard. “I imagine so. You didn’t strike me as someone keen on sugar.”

“It’s *diet*,” Will says in a tone that suggests Hannibal has confused Vivaldi for the nervous plucking of a stoned teenager.

Hannibal smiles and adjusts the boxes until they're aligned. He folds the canvas grocery bag into quarters, moving to the laundry room. "I see you've rearranged parts of the kitchen," he says over his shoulder, just as his feet move from hardwood to the cool porcelain tiles.

When he emerges, Will's head is still in his arms. Only the merest crescent of cyan and gold peaks around a fold of white coveralls near his elbow as he meets Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal has not yet spent more than a few days with a newly homed omega who hadn't at least attempted to make sense of the space. For many years, he'd purposefully rearranged the kitchen in as odd a fashion as he could imagine, finding a sort of immaculate pleasure in opening a drawer, expecting dishtowels or a serving platter, only to find a sugar bowl and tea bags. With the thought, a dozen or so soft, pouting faces turn up to him like individual threads of a movie reel.

Sorry for messing up your kitchen, Hannibal, one says, biting her lip in a manner that, even now, makes him feel tired.

Sorry, sir.

Sorry, Dr. Lecter.

Or, out of one unfortunate creature's mouth, *Sorry, master.*

Daddy had been mercifully absent.

Will snorts into his arms. "It's arranged like a blind person who's never used a kitchen. Why would the utensil drawer be *that* far from the stove?"

Hannibal removes a small stack of covered glass dishes from the refrigerator and arranges them beside the stove. "It's closer to both the refrigerator and the dining room."

"Yeah? You usually need a ladle to get something from the fridge?"

"Often enough."

The doorbell rings as Will snorts again and Hannibal tips the remnants of the previous night's meal into a pan. He turns to ask Will to answer the door, but the omega is already on his bared feet, the side of his face creased from where it's been resting against his shirt sleeve. Hannibal hears the front door open and feels the gust of wintery air that follows. He rounds the kitchen island to peer into the foyer, just as Will closes the door.

Alana Bloom stands in his foyer. Beside her, removing her coat, Will looks happy. Hannibal returns to the stove to busy himself with stirring the contents of the pan, looking at Alana over his shoulder with a smile when she clacks into the kitchen.

"Forgive me for not calling first, but when you weren't at your office, I thought I'd try you here. I promise I'll be quick." She waves a roped folder at him before letting it fall to the kitchen island with a *thwack* loud enough to make Will flinch. "Sorry," she says in a softer voice. "How are things?"

Though Hannibal isn't looking at her, he's sure Alana's eyes are on him.

"S'fine," Will says.

Hannibal turns the heat down on the stove and removes a glass lid from a nearby cupboard. The food can simmer while he waits for Alana to depart. He leans back against the edge of the counter and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Why are you still wearing the coveralls?" Alana asks Will.

Annoyance stirs in Hannibal's gut. He had, after all, not known the size or shape of Will before meeting him. And while the photographs of Will he could find online, looking annoyed at morose at various crime scenes, had been interesting, they'd hardly assisted him in choosing a wardrobe. Hunter's plaid and hiker's trousers were not items he'd been inclined to learn where to purchase.

"What's wrong with the coveralls?" Will asks, plucking the pale fabric from his chest.

"They're fine."

"Can you give us a moment, Will?" Alana asks. Her hand flits near Will's forearm. She doesn't touch it but is close enough that Will tucks it across his chest.

Will glowers at Hannibal as he makes his way out of the kitchen.

"I left him catalogues to browse when he first arrived and I can assure you his clothing is on order," Hannibal says after Will leaves. He stirs the contents of the frying pan. "He alone insists on the coveralls, though he most often wears my clothing when we're home."

"If he is insisting on the coveralls, he's not comfortable here."

When he turns to Alana, it's a conscious effort not to re-cross his arms. "It would be a feat indeed if Will was ever comfortable again, much more so if it occurred within the past few months." He relaxes his expression into an easy smile. "Give us some time, Alana."

She scans his face as he speaks and, in that, she is very much like Will. Like all omegas. Looking for intent, for the truth underneath the hard-muscled charm of alphan skin; cracks and crevices suggesting more.

"Look, I'm sorry," she finally says, though the wrinkle at her mouth presses deep. "It's just-I spoke with Jack Crawford a few days ago. I didn't know you knew Will before you homed him. Or that Jack had confessed his concerns about Will to you."

"I knew *of* Will before homing him," Hannibal says. Alana's wrinkle deepens further. "I had an interest in Will before he presented, yes, but one borne of professional curiosity only. It's hardly objectionable. I find it difficult to imagine you'd prefer a sole desire to breed him."

"At least that would be understandable."

"Companionship is--"

“A *science experiment*, Hannibal, is objectionable.”

“I understand it was you, in fact, who helped Jack work through his feelings about Will. His . . . confusion, as he called it. You and Frederick both warned me Will might be difficult. I can assure you he’s been anything but.”

Hannibal retrieves the folder from the countertop and slides it free from its rope. He thumbs through the documents inside.

”Permit me to also assure you I have no intention of using Will as a science experiment, despite whatever tidbits of myself I may have revealed at John Hopkins after too many late nights and far too much chianti. I may find a certain professional interest in reading about such experiments, the same way medical students find interest in reading about lobotomies, but I have no desire to perform one myself.”

“Matthew-“

Hannibal fights back a sigh. “The orderly has a deeply emotional connection with Will due, I might add, in no small part to Frederick’s decision to throw him at Will’s mercy while in heat. Nevertheless, we recently reached an understanding, he and I. Or at least, I assume that’s what you’re speaking of.”

Alana’s jaw works. She looks for a moment like she might object but sits herself at the kitchen island instead. She waves her hand at the folder. “The state finally sold Will’s house. I need to discuss the proceeds with you.”

Hannibal rebinds the folder. “I don’t see why. They’re the institute’s proceeds as Will and I are neither married nor expecting.”

“He has to be informed. You know this.”

“I’m so pleased you’re here, then.”

It’s unforgivably rude. Still, he turns to the stove to stir the contents of the pan. Greens and browns and reds stare back at him atop the fizz and pop of oil. He eyes the clock on the stove without absorbing the time.

He turns off the stove and retrieves two plates from a nearby cupboard. “As it is, I’m running late for an appointment. By all means, help yourself to dinner and take all the time you need with Will. I’ll be home late.”

As he starts his car, leaving Alana to *clack* around the manor, he has every intention of checking his office to see whether the restoration team has gotten around to repainting the walls with the imported colors he and the insurance adjuster had battled at length over. As a result, it’s with both surprise and resignation that he instead finds himself pulling around to the back of a low-slung building off Charles Street.

The interior of the bar is the same as it’s always been. As it was when Hannibal had last been inside. Dark, damp, situated at what Americans unironically call the garden level, with half of

its façade above ground and half below. If Hannibal is lucky, and he's certainly feeling lucky, the bathroom doors might still be off their hinges.

It is simple, inelegant, and almost empty. It's the first place he was called *daddy* and just about the last place he wants to be.

He permits himself to lament briefly about not changing his outfit before he'd come. But really, he'd hardly had the time. His dressed-down sweater-and-trousers ensemble will have to do. And there's already a beautiful young beta at the end of the bar promising him devastation in the curl of her lips.

He orders a dark red wine from the bartender but changes his mind almost at once. The bar keeps neither the 15- or 20-year scotch in the brand Will prefers but does have a 12-year that Hannibal accepts. His training and education hot in the contours of his brain, he examines – but ultimately ignores – the feeling that arises behind his sternum. One suggesting he's been caught with a schoolboy's sketchbook, *H.L. plus W.G.* scrawled within.

The faux wood of the bar top is sticky under the edges of his hands and his coat and he presses down harder on both.

“Dr. Lecter.”

He looks to the end of the bar. The pretty beta is gone.

“Adam,” he says, refocusing on the barstool next to him. “I am almost as surprised to see you here as I was in my office last week.”

Adam reaches for Hannibal's hand, which is gripped loosely around the tumbler of scotch. Hannibal lets him. The omega runs a delicate, soft finger against the outer edge of his ring finger. “Me too, after seeing that gorgeous thing you have at home.”

“Gorgeous, yes, but ultimately disinterested.”

Adam grimaces and pulls away. “Gorgeous but disinterested. You could paint that on my forehead.”

Hannibal inhales delicately. The omega smells of the chemical and plastic reek of suppressants. “You appear to be alone tonight. Are things not faring better at home?”

“It was supposed to be date night, but he got drunk and passed out.” Adam turns on his barstool until his knees press into Hannibal's thigh. One arm goes to the back of Hannibal's chair, the other across the bar top, until he's spread halfmoon around Hannibal. “I'd rather talk about you. And what you're doing here.”

Hannibal opens his mouth to inhale the omega's scent, wading through the dampening effect of the suppressants, until he can coat his tongue and the roof of his mouth with it. Sweet water, oranges, grass . . . *musk*. His teeth clench around the last scent. The pulse in his groin hitches.

He leans sideways into the omega's open embrace until he feels Adam's breath on his cheek. "I am no less bound by law in this bar than I am in my office."

"You live with a cocktease and I live as one with a man who couldn't care less." The words are filed sharp with a smirk. "I think it's the least we're owed."

The omega's cyan blue eyes darken to navy as Hannibal meets them. "I have no intention of being arrested, Adam, despite the appeal of what's on offer," Hannibal says. "And rest assured, it is indeed appealing."

Adam traces his fingertips up Hannibal's back before, lightning fast, he gropes the front of Hannibal's slacks. Hannibal growls softly at the "*oh, Christ*" the omega breathes in a low sigh against his cheek.

"Adam." Hannibal's growl deepens, turning briefly into a purr as Adam cups him and runs his fingers lightly against the outline of Hannibal's growing erection.

Hannibal spends a few minutes fighting the omega's advances in a half-hearted way, only to be quelled when Adam presses his mouth to Hannibal's ear. The soft, sweet whine he breathes between them decides it.

He follows Adam to the parking lot in a stalk that rushes blood in his ears.

The omega is hot and fragrant under Hannibal's fingers. He arches in ways Hannibal knows he'll commit to memory. His teeth graze along Adam's throat. He presses the flat of his palm against the top of Adam's chest and then presses harder when the omega giggles nervously.

Once Adam is bare from the waist up, and despite the wintery chill in the air, the omega says, "You look like you're going to eat me." He twitches away from Hannibal's roaming mouth.

Hannibal feels very much like a predator as he surveys the soft expanse of Adam's throat. "Don't tempt me," he says to the crux of the omega's neck and shoulder, where the silvery glow of the bite mark long past healed shines back. He grips the omega's shoulder and turns him against the damp brick wall of the bar.

"Whoa, okay, okay, all right," Adam says, giggling again. "*Oh, God.*"

Hannibal unbuttons his own shirt to feel the heat from Adam's skin against his chest. The growl that escapes him builds as Adam exposes his neck to the noise. The omega exhales soft words and high mewls of pleasure into the space between Hannibal's hands.

Hannibal pulls Adam's hips back and grinds down hard, licking at the small, blue tattoo behind his left ear with the flat of his tongue. "You are absolutely stunning, you know."

It's the wrong thing to say. All at once, the musk and clean sweat smell of the omega's arousal fades.

Hannibal closes his eyes. He presses his forehead into Adam's hair, trying to keep the grit of his teeth from leaking into his voice. "Would you like to stop?"

“I-I-“

“Did I hurt you?” Hannibal asks, knowing he hasn’t. He turns, adjusts himself in his trousers, and buttons his shirt. The blue-black gleam of his car across the pockmarked asphalt of the parking lot is inviting.

“N-no, no, I’m sorry, I-“

“Please, do not apologize,” Hannibal says, as much to reassure the omega as to shut him up. With a great effort, he gives Adam a soft, half-amused smile. “As I’ve said, sex was never an option. I anticipated this would be your reaction. Now we both know.”

He retrieves Adam’s shirt from where he’s thrown it on top of the nearest sedan and hands it back to him. The omega takes it, looking up at Hannibal with wet eyes. His irises are so like Will’s – the startling blue rimmed only slightly by a thin but distinct line of gold. Hannibal looks away.

“You *are* beautiful, Adam,” Hannibal says. “I recommend couples’ counseling for you and your husband, who seems to have forgotten how to pay you kindness.”

The omega nods. A single tear leaks from the corner of his eye. Hannibal swipes at it with his thumb and then presses it to Adam’s lips which part immediately to accept the offering.

”I’m going back inside to finish my drink. I suggest you return home.”

He leaves the omega standing there, skin glowing red and blue under the fluorescent lighting of the bar, his shirt gripped tight to his naked chest. Hannibal finds the sight both devastating and beautiful, much like the creature himself.

He returns to the bar, though he keeps his gaze away from the other patrons. A few drinks later, he concludes that he hadn’t wanted Adam, not truly. He’d have happily fucked the boy had Adam relented. But what Hannibal wants, *truly* wants, is back at the manor, likely scowling in the study and biting at a thumbnail, scented with camphor and amber.

* * * * *

In the study, Will sits cross-legged on the rug with his back against the leather sofa. With him on the ground are three packets of paper: the purchase agreement for the little white house he’d left abandoned in the Virginia snow, mortgage paperwork from the bank, and an affidavit from a real estate attorney, to which a check drafted to the institute is attached.

He runs his hand once more inside the folder, certain there must be something else. *Anything* more than the relatively lean stack of documents to stand as proof of everything he’d accomplished before he’d presented. He reaches for the purchase agreement but pulls away quickly when his fingertips prickle with heat.

This late in the evening, he doesn’t dare look at his hands. “Alana, I really need you to sit down.”

She has, for reasons unknown, declined to sit. Instead, she paces noisily across the marble inlay before the fireplace like a semi-aware wind-up toy powered by kinetic energy alone.

She reeks of *outraged fury* and *anxiety*.

Clack, clack, clack.

The fireplace is lit, which is nice. The warmth is comforting in a way that the clothes and blankets proffered by the institute or his homing alphas never are. Which is odd. He'd liked bonfires and lit fireplaces before presenting. But he's actually drawn to them now, in a hapless way that suggests his prefrontal cortex has been shot through with a steel pipe and all he has left to rely on are his instincts.

Decidedly less nice is the way Alana keeps blocking the heat. Will squints at the purchase agreement.

Clack, clack, clack.

"Paragraph six," she recites from a copy of the same document in her hand. "The buyer agrees to purchase the property as-is and with the understanding that no warranties--"

"Alana," Will groans for what must be the fifth time in half as many minutes.

Clack, clack, clack.

"--promises, assurances, or any other agreements exist between the parties than those contained herein. If any such warranties, promises--"

Will presses his fingers to his eyelids. "Alana--"

Clack, clack, clack.

There is a headache building fast behind his eyes. Hannibal has a veritable pharmacy of medication stored in orange and white plastic bottles, or – as Will had initially eyed with some interest – plastic baggies in the linen closet on the second floor. He'd quickly discovered far too many were labeled by their chemical compounds instead of names he recognized, so he'd mostly avoided taste-testing the display. He has no interest in attempting to find a pain reliever with Hannibal out of the house, only to end up ingesting a blood thinner or something with severe side effects. It's not like he has access to the internet, after all.

Clack, clack, clack.

He stands abruptly. It takes Alana almost colliding into him before she notices he's moved.

"Oh," she says, taking a step back. She blows a strand of hair that's fallen from her increasingly undone ponytail out of her face. "I'm so sorry, I--"

He holds out one of his hands to her, palm up. She looks so beautiful it makes him ache. "May I?"

She frowns but places her hand in his.

From his skin to hers, he gives her what mild pleasantness he can summon around the pulsing throb in his head. He feeds her *peace*. He feeds her *tranquility* and *mild joy* and *contentment*, in whatever volume he can.

Still, the effect is remarkable. Alana blinks rapidly around the room. Her eyes are stunning – a dark gold with hints of alphan red that lightens to taupe as she smiles. Will wonders if it might be the most beautiful color he’s ever seen. The plum of her lips is a close second.

“Oh, *Will*.”

He takes a step back with a sheepish smile, fighting the urge to grip the back of his neck and blush. His instincts purr lazily at him.

It takes some time for her to come back to herself entirely, though that suits him just fine as he’s always enjoyed looking at the curve of her cheekbones and the soft, shiny wave of her hair and can stare now without apology. Inhaling her mild scent with an open mouth is nice, too, though her natural smell is mostly covered by perfume. He can’t seem to summon the will to feel ashamed for it.

When she does return fully, she drops the purchase agreement on the ground to settle herself on the couch. She pats the seat next to her.

He settles himself, though he’s not stupid enough to believe their dynamic hasn’t changed since Quantico. They’re both creatures of perfection, pushing themselves far too hard and far too late into the evenings not to occasionally run into each other in the building’s darkened hallways. Over time, as such things do, they’d begun to share a common workspace in the cafeteria late at night, though they spoke little. In the end, a few months before he’d presented, they’d sometimes fall asleep on the malformed plaid couch in the staff room. He’d run his fingers through her hair as she slept and spend far too much of the next morning with them pressed to his mouth, so he could still catch stray whiffs of her shampoo.

She’d sobbed when they’d brought him to the institute. It had been the last time she’d displayed anything but professional courtesy around him.

He wants desperately to stop the purr that’s building in his larynx. But the feeling of her head in his oter, the way his arm fits *just so* around her shoulder . . .

“God, how do you do that?” she asks. His purr stutters to a halt and then picks back up when she places one hand on his chest. “Like, one day you can’t, and the next day you just can. It’s incredible.”

To his utter mortification and a deep blush that creeps across his neck, his purr grows richer and deeper. The curve of Alana’s cheek against the thin fabric of the coveralls as she smiles feels *good*.

“Sorry about that,” she says after a long moment. She flicks one hand towards the abandoned paperwork in front of the fire. “I know you didn’t need me to explain how a house is sold.

You purchased it yourself, for goodness sake.”

“And one or two before that,” he says. “I don’t think Hannibal’s going to be home for a while, if that’s what you’re waiting for.”

“Not entirely, though I have a mind to stab him through the eye with my heel.”

Will chuckles, his purr expanding and contracting with the effort. It’s a silly sound that re-invigorates the blush at his cheeks, even as he feels Alana smile into his chest. They sit comfortably in the resulting silence until, suddenly, Alana says, “Freddie owes me fifty dollars!”

“Freddie?”

Alana makes a sort of sweet, disgusted *yeck*-ing sound in the back of her throat. “God, the man is insufferable. I’m definitely cashing this one in.”

“What was the bet?”

“Whether you could project your emotions at will.” She tilts her head back to look up at him, still smiling. “I knew you could, though Frederick insisted you were beholden to them. Idiot. Things are good, though?”

The non sequitur isn’t as surprising as it is disappointing. He shrugs.

“This is officially the longest you’ve been homed so far, you know,” Alana says. “For whatever that’s worth. The longest that Hannibal has ever homed anyone.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Hannibal mostly leaves me alone, which works for me. And since my other option is the institute . . . it’s fine. No problems to report. I mean, I don’t think I’ll ever really get used to feeling like a stranger in someone else’s home. But I have a whole mess of rooms that are mine alone. He’s a good cook, so that’s nice. It’s fine, really.”

Alana doesn’t respond. They sit for a while in silence. Will continues to run his fingers through her hair and she continues to rest against him, her ear over his larynx. The fire wanes. It’s only when Alana’s breathing becomes regular enough that Will is sure she’s fallen asleep that he gently shakes her shoulder.

She blinks up at him, smiling. “Sorry,” she says. She sits upright on the couch and rubs at her eyes. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

She leaves soon after, though she dithers on the porch. Will can’t help but smile, despite the weight that’s settling in his chest at her departure. “All right, spit it out.”

She dithers for a moment longer, eyeing her car where it’s parked in Hannibal’s driveway, looking past Will to the foyer of the manor. “Look, at the risk of sounding like a mental health professional-“

His smile fixes in place. “You’ll be the first I tell if things go south.”

“As I should be,” she says in a rare show of impatience. She looks away. “I don’t know how to say this diplomatically, so I’m just going to say it. Hannibal is not, by any means, a collector. As I’m sure you already know. And God, Will, I’d hate to have him know I’m saying this, but my gut has been warring with me for the better part of a month now.”

The winter air is icy against Will’s skin. He shifts from one foot to the other. “Okay.”

“But he’s experienced a lot.” She pauses. “He’s accomplished a lot. He has, like, four post-graduate degrees, all of them doctorates. He’s lived in five different countries, speaks more languages than that. I think he’s bored. I don’t know if he’s looking for a challenge, or . . . Look, it’s great things are going so well, but I feel it’s important-no, it’s *crucial*, I have an ethical obligation to tell you that Hannibal came to the institute specifically to home *you*. He was already aware of who you were and came for *you*.”

“Yeah, I know. It was one of the first things he told me.” To Will’s disquiet, Alana doesn’t at all look relieved. Instead, she nods slowly, her plum lips moving against her teeth. She smells faintly of concern and confusion. “He also hasn’t forced himself on me, insisted we share a bed, paraded me around town like arm candy, or been cruel. I’m okay here, Alana. Seriously. If that changes, I’ll let you know.”

Alana nods slowly. She descends the steps of Hannibal’s front porch and onto the sandstone walkway. She’s facing away from him when she says, “Well, I’m relieved to hear you know. I’d hate for you to find out and then get upset or . . . well, it’s good you already know.”

Oh. Alana isn’t protecting him from Hannibal. She’s protecting Hannibal from him.

To his horror, he feels the prickle of tears behind his eyes. It had been foolish, downright *stupid* of him to spend even a second pretending that nothing had changed. That she might look at him and see the betan colleague she’d spent so many long evenings with instead of the pitiable, weak, omegan *thing* he’d turned out to be.

Her concern is for Hannibal alone. Hannibal, who had in fact paraded him like a trained dog in front of Frederick and Matthew at the first opportunity.

The sea begins to gather at his feet. He swallows around the lump in his throat. As he closes the door, he says, “Even if I do get upset, I’m sure Hannibal can take care of himself. He is an alpha, after all.”

* * * * *

Back in the study, Will gathers the documents and shoves them into the folder. There’s a long, uncertain moment where he stands before the fireplace and considers tossing the bundle in the fire. But when the heat prickling his fingers turns from a threat to a promise, he sighs and heads upstairs to his bedroom. He deposits the folder into one of his empty dresser drawers with every intention of pretending like it never existed.

On top of the dresser are the files from Jack. He hesitates for only a moment before grabbing the topmost one. *Falls Road Arsonist* is written on a blue label on the front in Beverly’s tidy hand. The folder underneath informs him the contents of *The Panty Bandit* lay waiting.

Will scoffs, a low, ugly sound in the back of his throat. He knows a trap when he sees one.

Jack does think he's dangerous, after all. The alpha had never revealed why, exactly, he'd reached that conclusion and Will hadn't had the courage to ask.

He stills. Does Jack think *he's* the arsonist? Or the . . . panty bandit? It makes an awful, hilarious sort of sense; there's been more than a small handful of potential serial murders since Will had presented. Jack hadn't ask him to consult on any, though. He runs his fingers tentatively over the files. So why these?

The first page from the arsonist's file is a summary of the case. It informs him of a string of arsons dating six months back, culminating in a fire that had burned half of Roland Park. Will's stomach twists. He blinks against vivid reds and yellows and oranges, a fire that he – that the *arsonist* – had intended to remain centered on a single house. A house that must be burned in sanctified rectitude for the despicable man that lived within, but that had grown terribly in the wake of Will's (*the arsonist's*) failure to control it. In the end, the flames had taken out much of the foliage in Roland Park and the butterfly atrium that had been perched so beautifully-

Will shakes his head and brings the room back in focus.

The summary suggests tentatively, with the merest hint of embarrassment, that a number of middle-aged women have recently been strangled to death in the dead of night with the contents of their own underwear drawers.

It concludes with a question: *are they the same man?*

Will exhales through his nose, a derisive sound that's loud in the empty space of his bedroom. What the witnesses had pegged was no more than the average American adult man. And no, killers did not change MOs so drastically, even in the face of an arson gone ridiculously awry.

Anxiety pierces his chest. Jack knows this, so why ask Will? Was the FBI conflating the cases in an attempt to force the arsonist to publicly declaim his role as the bandit? Will searches quickly through the remaining documents. The file is a *mess*. There's not a single paragraph that lists whether any actual evidence had been gathered at the crime scenes. There's no mention of fingerprints, hair follicles, no suggested point of origin or accelerant for the fires, *nothing*.

Fine. He'll work with what he has.

He closes the files and brings them with him to the study. He snags a piece of drafting paper from Hannibal's desk and writes up a quick report. It's no more than a few paragraphs in which Will denounces the idea that the bandit and the arsonist are the same person, pointing out that even a first-year cadet could have reached the same conclusion, but otherwise proclaiming he has no other insights to share and, really, it'll be best for everyone if the FBI refrains from seeking his insights in the future.

He tucks the report in the arsonist's file and puts the whole mess of documents on the leather sofa for Hannibal to find.

A few hours later, the front door closing startles him awake. He's fallen asleep wrapped in every blanket Hannibal keeps in the study and spends a furious few moments extricating himself. Before he finally does, Hannibal makes a noise from the threshold of the room that Will can hear, even buried as he is under an absolute *fuckton* of furs and other materials which Hannibal only ever refers to by their French names.

The noise is decidedly condescending, although it might be nothing more than one of Will's own snorts made delicate and patronizing and distinctly foreign as only Hannibal can.

Will's already glaring when his head finally breaks surface. "Are you *laughing* at me?" He eyes Hannibal who returns the look mildly. "Well, I'm glad you're back. I wanted to talk to you about the cases Jack gave you." Will reaches towards the far end of the couch, towards the files, but pauses to scent the air. "Wait, are you drunk?"

Hannibal straightens his spine, though it does little to hide the disheveled state of his hair or the rumples at his cuffs and collar. With grave precision, he says, "Possibly."

"You don't say." Will leans back into the arm of the leather couch. He crosses his arms over his chest to peer at the alpha. For a few moments, it looks like Hannibal might bear the scrutiny with quiet dignity. But then he slumps forward, pressing himself more firmly against the doorjamb. Will nods at the other end of the couch. "You want to sit?"

Hannibal all but collapses on the sofa, on top of the files. He frowns and retrieves them from underneath himself with exaggerated, liquid movements.

"Oh," Will says, taking them from him. "I did a little write up for Jack's files. Can you . . . do you mind passing it along to him? I don't really want to profile anymore."

Will clutches the files to his chest and rests his chin on top of them.

Hannibal looks around the study for a long moment. "William," he finally says, the alcohol and its apparent effect on his tongue making his accent thicker. He attempts to brush a strand of hair back from his forehead but misses.

"Hannibal."

"Would you be so kind as to—" Hannibal begins, half his words in English and half in Cyrillic burs, before he slips completely into a language Will doesn't know.

"What was that?"

Hannibal looks at him, looks away. "*Stikline vandens.*"

"You want some water?" At Hannibal's nod, Will goes to the kitchen to retrieve a glass. He leaves the files on the kitchen island. When he returns to the study, Hannibal has righted himself on the couch, looking as regal and austere as he usually does, if not somewhat deflated. His hands are cupped loosely in his lap.

Will holds the glass out to him. "Here, take it."

Will resumes his spot on the sofa. He pulls the blankets off the floor, gathering them around his knees and his chest. He stares at Hannibal.

Hannibal is silent for a long moment. Finally, as Will is about to ask if he needs anything else, the alpha closes his eyes with a pained expression. He touches his lips. “*Jis buvo toks gražus. Bellissimo.*” Drawing his attention to Will, as though offering the word to him, he says, “*Beau.*”

It’s how Hannibal speaks when he comes to Will late into the night. Long after the nightmare scents of pepper and burning wood have already claimed Will’s subconscious. With the salt of sweat and tears and the sea drying from Will’s skin, they are the words Hannibal uses as he touches Will. While he pets through his wet hair or rests a palm against his face. And unconscious, but not, Will hears.

The words are rarely in English, sometimes in a tongue that recalls Will to steel factories and winter. But usually, they are in French.

Hannibal says, *De quoi rêvez-vous, quoi te fait peur? Tell me, Will.*

Partly asleep, partly alive with the language of the old men in the bayou, Will leans into the sounds as much as he does into the warm weight of Hannibal’s hand in his hair.

Se détendre, mon beau garçon. My love. My sweet thing.

Will pulls his knees tighter to his chest and tries to inhale without drawing attention to himself. Alcohol is not the only scent radiating from Hannibal. Cigarette smoke, for one, is not simply present but in abundance, although Will can only just picture Hannibal smoking. As is the burnt leather and chamomile scent of the interior of Hannibal’s car. But what gives Will pause and makes his stomach clench is the scent of sweat, skin, saliva, musk, *desire* that blossoms from Hannibal like an aura each time he moves.

Tu es en sécurité, Hannibal says, and the nightmares ease a little more. *Tu es à la maison.*

Endors-toi, mon charmant garçon, Hannibal says, just as Will falls deeply to sleep.

In the study, Hannibal presses his fingertips to his lips with a delicacy that mirrors the arched curved of his hands.

“He was beautiful?” Will asks. “Who? The man at the-at the bar?”

“*Oui, très beau.*” Hannibal closes his eyes. “*Mais il n'est pas vous.*”

In his den, burrowed under the duvet, Will texts Matthew. *Tell me you miss me.*

Matthew’s response is quick. *I miss you. You know I do. When are you coming back?*

Later that night, Hannibal says, “*Dors maintenant, mon petit,*” warm fingers and warm breath stirring Will’s hair. And Will sleeps with the feel of the alpha’s hands on him, just as high tide sets in.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

De quoi rêvez-vous, quoi te fait peur? > What do you dream of, what scares you?

Se détendre, mon beau garçon. > Relax, my beautiful boy.

Tu es en sécurité. > You are safe.

Tu es à la maison. > You are home.

Endors-toi, mon charmant garçon > Sleep, my lovely boy.

"Oui, très beau." Hannibal closes his eyes. *"Mais il n'est pas vous."* > Yes, [he was] very beautiful. . . . But he's not you.

Dors maintenant, mon petit. > Sleep now, little one.

That being said, I don't speak French. Even a little. So, please don't hesitate to know if any corrections should be made.

The Dinner Party

Chapter Summary

Hannibal throws a dinner party. Abel Gideon attends.

Will looks up at the sound of the doorbell. He's leaning over the kitchen island, a pen in one hand and a sticky note in the other. Open at his hip is Hannibal's *new*, entirely more *sensible* utensil drawer positioned closer to the stove.

"Woodward?" he calls, scribbling out the rest of his note. It says: *You can thank me later.*

When the aged butler fails to appear, Will drops the note in the drawer before closing it and padding to the front door.

The moment he opens the door, he wishes he hadn't. He knows the man standing on the porch at once. Neither the frat boy sunglasses nor the man's upturned collar do anything to mask the horrific smell of Hannibal's chauffer. He gives off the same fire-and-brimstone scent as all alphas. But it's the miasma of underlying scents – stale water, pipe cleaner, mothballs – that stir Will's instincts to life.

No, no, no, he's desperate and unable to provide. Run!

"Oh, you poor thing, look at you," the chauffer says, taking a step towards the open door. Will takes an immediate step back and the chauffer stills though he continues to look pained. "You don't have any clothes that fit? Poor, sweet thing."

Will takes another step back though the chauffer hasn't moved. Oblivious or inept, the chauffer tilts his head at a sympathetic angle. Will doesn't need to see his eyes, hidden behind sunglasses despite the overcast day, to know the man's pupils are blown wide.

"Uh, hey," Will says, fighting the urge to tug at the hem of his too-small shirt where it's ridden up to expose his bellybutton. He takes another step back. "Dr. Lecter isn't home."

Will isn't sure whether it's his refusal to accept the alpha's affections or the reminder that Will is currently being homed by an alpha who's also the chauffer's occasional employer, but the man clears his throat and turns his head towards the driveway where Hannibal's ostentatious car sits idling. In a gruffer voice, he says, "Well, I'm here to pick you up, aren't I?"

Will swallows back a sneer. "*Are* you?"

"Yeah, I-oh." The chauffer uses his teeth to remove one of his gloves and fumbles around the pockets of his puffy, plasticky jacket before producing a slightly crumpled piece of paper.

“Dr. Lecter asked me to give you this before I took you.”

Took you, Will thinks blithely, plucking the note from the chauffer’s beefy hand.

The chauffer frowns. “You might want to change clothes before we go.”

Will gives him a flat look. He retreats a few feet into the manor, ostensibly to avoid the chill seeping into the house through the open door, but mostly to hide however the slight bloom of fear tugging at his stomach might show on his face. The last thing he needs is for the chauffer’s more possessive instincts to come alive in the face of a distraught omega.

He ignores the way the chauffer hesitates on the front porch, then opens the note.

Please join me at my office this afternoon. I wish to speak with you.

Will reads the note twice, three times. He flips it over to see if there’s anything written on the back. “What, he’s summoning me? Why?”

The chauffer shrugs, his body decidedly turned away from Will and the shirt that is now barely covering his chest.

Will flips the note over again to ensure the back is still blank before crumpling it into his fist. He considers tossing it on the ground but at the thought of Woodward bending at the waist to retrieve it, keeps it in hand.

In the backseat of Hannibal’s car, he runs his free hand over the knee of his coveralls and scents the air. He categorizes the chauffer’s emotions as they strike him. Warm vanilla and lavender. *Mild, fond concern*. He twists the fabric between his fingers. Something tangy and not-quite ripe – a sour, citrusy scent that reminds Will of a terrible home-brewed IPA. *Regret*.

He inhales again. It’s a regret of sorts, and one that the chauffer has been holding onto for a long time. There’s something more personal to the combination of smells, though. Tang and citrus alone suggest regret, but this is a deep, lifelong regret that . . . Will’s eyes dart to the chauffer’s hands where they grip the steering wheel with such force that the leather creaks.

Will ducks his head. He thinks words in a voice that’s not his own but is an imitation of the chauffer’s clipped gruff. *Dammit, I came on too strong, again. Always too strong. Always, always, always*. The man’s neck twitches at each word Will thinks.

Suddenly, warm vanilla swallows the scent of bad beer and Will ducks his head further, knowing he’ll meet the chauffer’s beady eyes if he looks at the rearview mirror.

When they pull in front of a row of office buildings on a main stretch of Baltimore’s less crowded downtown area, Will mumbles, “Thanks,” with his chin tucked into his chest. The entire street is lined with similar beige-yellow brick buildings in various stages of opulence. Will frowns. “Uh, which one is it?”

Once the chauffer points at the correct building and Will heads inside, it’s easy to follow the doctor’s scent through the single, narrow hallway and into the waiting room beyond. He

walks with purpose, eager to put as much distance between himself and the fidgety chauffeur as possible.

Inside the waiting room, Will looks for a trash can that isn't there. He considers putting the note into his pocket before, with an urge he doesn't bother to examine, he flattens it out over his thigh instead. He balls it up again when he realizes there's no chance it'll lay flat. In the end, it goes into a wide, low bowl on a glass side table that contains an assortment of decorative wooden balls in roughly the same size and texture as the crumpled note.

He wonders how long it'll take Hannibal or the building's cleaning crew to notice it and finds himself pleasantly surprised when Hannibal's eyes dart to it the moment he opens the door to his office.

"Did you object so profoundly to my note?" Hannibal asks. He gestures into his office and beyond, towards one of the low leather-and-steel chairs facing each other halfway into the room.

Will walks past the chairs and to the nearest bookshelf, his back to Hannibal. He leaves the note in the silver bowl. "You might want to consider putting a trash can in your waiting room."

"I might," Hannibal says. Will hears a rustle of fabric and the slight groan of leather compressing under Hannibal's weight as he sits. "Though there's much to be learned from a patient unable to dispose of their trash. Will they ask to discard it in my office? If so, is it done with confidence or a tentative smile and an apology? Will they hide it in their purse or a pocket? Keep it in their hand throughout the session? I once had a patient hold an empty iced coffee cup for a full hour, only to decline to dispose of it when I offered." Hannibal pauses. "I must say, I have not yet had a patient attempt to hide their refuse amongst my décor."

"Well, if I knew you had the eyes of a hawk . . ." Will mutters, hunching his shoulders as he scans the bookshelf nestled into the farthest corner of the room. Unlike the study at the manor, the office seems to contain books written only in English, all them of suitably appropriate taste to decorate the shelves of a psychiatrist's lair. There are far more books than Chilton has. "And I'm hardly a patient."

"Correct, you are not," Hannibal says. "Though I must admit to having a certain clinical interest in you."

At that, Will turns to Hannibal, shoving his fists into the pockets of his jacket. Hannibal is sitting at a drafting table much like the one in his study, a large sheet of sketching paper before him. "If you've had even one conversation with Alana about me, you'd know that was the wrong thing to say. Your little request-slash-threat that I parade myself at the institute last week wasn't enough for you?"

"You seek honesty so often, yet continue to balk when you receive it," Hannibal says. "A pity. Luckily for us both, you aren't here for a session. You're here because I'm here, and we have a date with the haberdasher."

* * * * *

Hannibal smiles at the omega's scowl. At some point over the last few days, a wave of mild sentimentality has settled over his skin. Now that the restoration team has finished repairing his office, he'd spent the better part of the day unpacking the last few boxes of books and wiping down surfaces. Putting the last little tidbits of the space back in order. The sentimentality had birthed a desire to have Will be the first to step into the room once it was complete, in the way a knight might drive his sword into virgin soil to claim it as his own.

As he watches Will circle the room slowly, he knows he's made the right choice.

Hannibal checks his watch. The haberdasher is just around the corner and his chauffeur had been a few minutes early. He has time to stretch the moment out a little longer. Content, he peels back a corner of the protective wax sheet atop the paper on the drafting table, grabs the 2H pencil he'd been dabbling with earlier in the day, and bows his head to his work.

Will is nothing but camphor today, the hints of sticky-sweet amber and charcoal that typically smooth its pungency are lost in favor of wood and menthol, herbal and spicy, cooling, with a hint of scorched earth that twists the piano wire deep in Hannibal's gut.

He keeps sketching as Will moves closer, his approach noisy and ungraceful. The omega stops a foot or so behind the drafting table. Camphor blooms as he leans in to look at the sketch.

To Hannibal's delight, instead of complimenting the drawing, Will says, "Your chauffeur is sterile. Does he know?"

Hannibal exchanges the pencil for a thin tortillon, pleasure coiling behind his ribcage. "I do not make a habit of discussing the fertility of my acquaintances. You could scent it?"

Will sighs, though it's a sound of contemplation rather than frustration. "No. Kind of. It's more like . . . what he felt when he saw me, which is probably what he feels when he sees any omega. Desperation, uncertainty, confusion, longing. I got the impression he's dated, might have been married, but doesn't have kids. He's not bonded and is old enough to start panicking about it."

"In that case, did *you* tell him?"

"No," Will says. "But I'm not a medical doctor."

The pleasure coils deeper. "And I am?"

"Or were. Probably were."

When he turns to Will, the omega is looking across the room to the floor-to-ceiling windows, his fists still deep in the pockets of his jacket.

"Those massive curtains," Will says. "Or the drapes, whatever they are. Were you a surgeon?"

The urge to touch, to reach out and *seize*, to ravage and consume the anxious creature by his hands or his shoulders or his hips strikes Hannibal with a suddenness that turns his body back

towards the drafting table. He presses the tortillon to the paper but keeps it still. "Tell me."

Will takes a deep breath. "Well, uh, you either decorated your office in the exact same way you decorated your house, or you hired the same person to do it. The curtains, though, you definitely picked those. They don't really . . . I dunno, they don't fit, aesthetically, I mean. You don't have anything like them at the manor. They're too modern. Block colors? The red and gray? It's an-" Will stops, his throat clicking as he swallows.

". . . an?"

"They're barber poles, right? But, like, 20 feet long. And there's two of them. I mean, I guess there isn't any blue, but blue isn't really part of the color scheme here. And they're symbolic anyway." Will hesitates again. "A pretty frickin' huge homage to your past. Did you lose your medical license or something?"

Hannibal stands, ignoring the coltish way Will flinches as he does, and takes his suit jacket from the back of his chair with a flourish. As he puts it on, he smiles at the omega's narrowed eyes.

Hannibal glances at the grandfather clock across the room. "Come, Will. If we don't leave now, we'll miss our appointment entirely."

* * * * *

In the end, Will submits to the haberdasher with poor grace.

"*Oh, my god*," he says for the fourth, fifth, sixth time as the plump, graying beta gestures for him to lift his arms. "This is the fucking worst."

Hannibal, erect but comfortably pressed against the dressing room door, smiles. "Your desire is to look disheveled?"

Will glowers at him. "My *desire* is to not be a human pincushion."

"He hasn't come anywhere near puncturing you, as you well know."

Will glowers further. "I'd like to see you stand here, looking stupid." To the top of the beta's head, he snarls, "I look stupid."

"You know he doesn't speak English." The beta smacks the back of Will's arm to keep it raised. "As charming as your petulance may occasionally be, I must insist you not only wear a suit tonight, but one that has the benefit of fitting you. Dear Mr. Kravets here has agreed to hem your clothing today, as a favor to me. Do try."

"Remind me why I can't wear the coveralls."

"We compromised."

"For donuts," Will mutters. "I negotiated badly."

The haberdasher turns to Hannibal and lets loose a litany of Cyrillic sounds, the soft burr of his words peppered with animated motions towards Will. Hannibal responds in kind.

Will snorts. “So, you speak Russian as well as Ionic Greek?”

“I never claimed to speak Ionic Greek,” Hannibal says. Will rolls his eyes. The haberdasher smacks the back of Will’s hand. “He speaks Ukrainian, a language I do not speak. Although it’s close enough to Russian for us to communicate with some efficacy.”

“*To communicate with some efficacy,*” Will parrots at the top of the man’s bent head. “Why are my arms raised?” He looks at Hannibal, who has only a moment to brace himself before Will breathes a tinkling, trilling whine that clenches every muscle from Hannibal’s groin to his neck. “Can you ask him, please?”

“I could,” Hannibal says, allowing himself to be momentarily pierced by a flash of desire as it rakes broken fingernails across his chest. “But considering he – or, rather, his countrymen – are the inspiration for tonight’s meal, I feel obliged to support his efforts in totality, ludicrous or otherwise.”

“You admit they’re ludicrous, then!” Will all but shouts as Hannibal leaves the dressing room to find a pair of cufflinks with a sapphire inset the same shade as the omega’s eyes.

It takes the haberdasher a few more minutes to finish pinning Will’s clothes and another hour to hem them. While they wait, Will stands to one side of the store with his fists deep in the pockets of his jacket and his shoulders hiked up around his ears. He ignores Hannibal’s attempts at small talk.

It’s only when Hannibal pauses in the chilly air outside the haberdashery, the black garment bag stuffed full of Will’s new clothing slung over his arm, that the omega mumbles, “Thanks,” under his breath.

Back at the manor, when Will emerges showered and appropriately tailored, Hannibal finds the slaughter to have been worth the cause.

Hannibal has chosen a charcoal gray suit and, after Will had vehemently vetoed anything with either color, design, or taste, a simple white shirt and black tie. The result is elegant, if somewhat more muted than Hannibal would have preferred.

Still, the omega is breathtaking.

Hannibal holds out a pair of paisley socks that compliments his own suit as Will pads barefoot into the kitchen. “Stop pulling on your collar,” Hannibal says, not looking up from the pot bubbling on the stove. “It will stretch.”

“It’s tight. And those socks are stupid.”

Hannibal keeps his arm outstretched and, after a moment, Will sighs and takes them. Hannibal hears the rustle of fabric and the soft, tell-tale exhale of so many men past 30 bending at the waist to don socks and shoes. He turns from the stove, a dishcloth in his hands,

to watch Will straighten. The omega's hands go to the collar of his shirt but, catching Hannibal's eye, rolls his and smooths the front of his jacket instead.

"You look quite handsome," Hannibal says. "*Beau est beau.*"

"Yeah, okay." Will inhales sharply and looks around the kitchen. "Want some help?"

Hannibal retrieves a handful of vegetables from the fridge and sets them before Will with a cutting board and knife. He watches the omega hack at the vegetables with muted rage and tries to repress a wince with each disjointed thwack of steel on wood. There's no harm in Will's decimation, not really, as the vegetables will ultimately be lost to the red coating of the borscht simmering on the stove. But still.

"You chop vegetables with the grace of a maniacal gorilla," Hannibal says, turning back to the stove.

"Yeah, you told me that exact same thing last week. Yet here we are." Will's words are followed by a quick treble of *thwack, thwack, thwack*. "Pretty shortsighted of you." *Thwack, thwack, thwack*. "I could always take a nap instead."

"Yet here we are," Hannibal repeats as he eyes the clock on the stove. Turning the burner under the simmering pot higher, he says, "You awoke only a few hours ago, after sleeping almost twelve. Do you require a nap?"

The pieces have come together much faster for Hannibal than for Will. A few nights before, Will had fallen asleep on the sofa in the study, as bare-chested as always, while Hannibal worked. Hannibal had paused, content as always to watch Will as he slept. The omega is sweet and docile in repose as he never is awake.

Hannibal had thrilled in the press of his fingers to Will's spine, as Will arched into the touch with a quiet noise halfway between a moan and a sigh. He'd woken briefly to bat Hannibal's hand away, only to settle his head more comfortably on Hannibal's lap. When Hannibal had skated his fingertips across Will's stomach, intending to lightly skim his nails against the usually hard flesh, he'd paused.

He'd tapped his fingers around Will's midsection to the feel of a thin layer of doughy flesh instead of the taut spread of muscle. He had rolled the flesh gently between his fingers and raked the omega's body for other clues of his impending heat.

If Hannibal listens closely enough, perhaps if the stove could run a little quieter, he may have heard the scrapping edges of cardboard puzzle pieces move across the ground and fit together, sandy and dry, as Will reaches the same conclusion.

Instead, he hears the clap of the blade slow. When he turns, Will's elbows are on the counter and he's gripping his hair in one hand.

"Fuck," Will whispers. "Already?"

Hannibal has been disconcertedly eager for Will's first heat. He finds omegas, as a gender, to be more-or-less consistent in mannerism and emotion during such times and so, has spent the last few days thrumming with curiosity to witness Will in a uniquely agitated state of unrest. Will's file has promised him all manner of novel experiences: violent when needs expressed go unfulfilled, temperamental – or, Hannibal supposes, as Will scowls at the counter - *more* temperamental, refusing all affection or contact, sullen.

Violent.

With the thought, he resumes cooking. He ladles a portion of borscht and blows to cool it, trying to relax the tightness in his groin. He checks the holubsti, the varenyky, the various meats and sweet breads laid in neat rows along the counter. Only when he is certain he can face Will without the budding press of hardness between his legs or coloring his features does he turn back.

The expression on Will's face drives him to an instinct he obeys at once. "I am a doctor," he says. "It's rather uncommon but not unheard of for omegas to divest themselves of the first heat, or any and all other heats, while homed by an alpha with whom they have no intention of bonding. You are only in pre-heat now, so this would be an opportune time."

Will inhales.

Hannibal ladles another small serving of borscht and tastes it. Blindly, he plucks a lemon from a small bowl near the stove, divides it with adroit arcs, and squeezes it into the stew. "As I'm sure you're already aware, there is medication, suppressants, all of it intended for short-term use to obtain this particular outcome." He pauses. "It would, of course, be assumed that any medication I prescribe on your behalf is only in your best interest."

Will says nothing but neither does he resume chopping.

"It is a temporary solution at best," Hannibal continues and then, before he can stop himself, "There are other options, of course. I could return you briefly to the institute to ride out your heat. Or have you spend time in an omegan hotel. In any way I may be of assistance . . ." Hannibal lets the sentence die with an uncomfortable squeeze to his gut and chest. "In any event, it's a decision you'll need to make before you go into active heat. The Maryland Psychological Association takes a dim view of alphas who make such decisions on behalf of their homed omegas, and I'd rather keep this particular license."

Presented omega.

The proditor.

Protect and shelter.

He feels more than hears Will swallow behind him. "Thanks, Hannibal, I-I really appreciate that. I'll give it some thought."

Hannibal suppresses a wince. Will usually reserves the use of Hannibal's first name for placation alone, when he believes Hannibal will be upset or displeased with something he's

done. When he'd broken Hannibal's finest decanter the week before while tipsy on scotch in the middle of the night, or after Hannibal had awoken one evening to the decided *lack* of Will's scent in the manor, only to find him curled in blankets on the front porch, chilled and flushed from a nightmare.

Or, fleetingly, when Will moans his name while asleep, his wet mouth open and his teeth pressed against Hannibal's thigh, thrusting into the confines of his pajama bottoms as Hannibal does no more than stroke his hair and purr.

Otherwise, Will snaps a generic 'doctor' or, at his most defiant, 'Dr. Lecter' when he deigns to use a title at all.

This cautious, polite use of Hannibal's first name is as clear a sign as a beacon across a bog: Will has no desire to spend his heat with Hannibal.

Hannibal turns his back to Will and cracks his neck to relieve some of the budding irritation. It would be preferable, of course, for Will to come to Hannibal just before his heat flowers. The omega would be sweating and wild-eyed. His heat might even take him entirely before Hannibal has time to make other arrangements.

Hannibal lets the thoughts play out as the borscht bubbles merrily on the stove.

Returning Will to the institute isn't an option, not with Matthew so nearby. An omegan hotel, though? Hannibal could escort Will to his room, spend some time arranging the bed and sitting room alike, ensuring his scent is spread like a film over the entire room. Hannibal might stay a little longer than strictly necessary, claiming that he must prepare a few, easily digestible meals to ensure Will remains healthy. He'll say it just as Will sinks further into his heat, as sweat and slick run in thin rivulets against his skin. Hannibal imagines the bone-deep pleasure he'd experience lapping the liquids up with his tongue once heat finally claims the boy properly.

And once Will does give in, once he is glassy-eyed and begging Hannibal to take him and knot him, Hannibal might even feign reluctance. Only for Will to turn into a ball of anxious energy ripe for Hannibal to unwind with his fingers and mouth.

After all, who would he be to turn Will away? The acquiescent, doting things alphas are – that *Hannibal* is – when an omega in heat is so near and in such need.

The next small ladle of borscht is a touch too tangy. He adds another beet.

* * * * *

The guests arrive slowly for the dinner party and with each arrival, Will fidgets with renewed energy.

After an hour of watching Will flounder, at the brink of conjuring a storm, Hannibal brings him into the kitchen where they can stand alone.

“Will,” Hannibal says softly, touching the omega’s chin with light fingers to force Will to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Will says, wrenching his chin from Hannibal’s fingers with a sneer. At the tight press of Hannibal’s lips, he whines softly. “I hate parties. And people.”

Hannibal smiles. “That may be. But it’s expected of me and frankly, I don’t share your aversions.” Will sighs but straightens himself. Hannibal touches Will’s chin again and the sneer returns. “I have every confidence you’ll survive your discomfort this evening. If it would suit you better, you’re free to answer the door instead of mingling.”

Will’s eyebrows come together briefly. “You want me to be the doorman?”

“No. I’d prefer you set aside your discomfort. Acting as the doorman is my compromise.”

Will bares his teeth but turns his chin from Hannibal’s grasp, stalking through the kitchen to stand by the front door. When Hannibal meets his gaze, Will rolls his eyes and shoos Hannibal away with a flip of his wrist.

Hannibal crosses to the dining room and is immediately cornered by Ms. Komeda.

Each time he sees her, dressed in clothing too flashy and tight to be anything other than obscene, he wonders why he’d invited her. It’s the same thought he has each time he agrees to escort her for a night on the town or accepts her phone call. A thought that dissolves immediately when she speaks.

“My, my, Hannibal, *child*,” she purrs with bass notes and a thrumming energy that reminds him of rutting alphas. “What a devastating, stunning little creature you have there.”

Hannibal smiles, running his arm through hers. “Catherine, what an absolute pleasure it is to see you.”

She clucks her tongue dismissively. If Hannibal was any other type of man, he’d have claimed her years ago.

“God, but he is gorgeous. Really, dearest, you must consider lending him,” she says with neither shame nor mercy. She turns to Hannibal, the red-black hue of her eyes darkening to pitch. “I don’t suppose you might indulge this lonely old woman and confess – what *does* he look like when you breed him? The mind so wonders.”

He pats her hand and turns her away from the entrance to the foyer. She is no true threat; an alpha who prefers sparring with wooden swords and venomous words to conquering. Still, he turns.

“Loose lips sink ships, Ms. Komeda.”

“*Loose lips*,” she purrs. “Don’t tease me. I would render him senseless.”

She maintains a small tirade of comments as Hannibal steers her through the other guests. His gaze is caught by the plasticky flashes radiating from sequins or jewels and the glint of

firelight ricocheting from raised stemware.

It's been far too long since he's indulged himself by throwing a party. He's missed it.

Mostly to herself, Ms. Komeda says, "One that tall, that broad, I bet he whines."

Then, "He begs, doesn't he?"

Then, "What color are his eyes when he says 'please.'"

She wanders away a few moments later to find her husband. Hannibal turns to approaching guests. He kisses knuckles and shakes hands as they are raised. He basks in their comments about the food, the décor, the cortege. He smiles at their shock and jealousy as he confesses the doorman is indeed his.

When he can, Hannibal catches glimpses of Will. The omega continues to fidget and glower. Hannibal can abide it, for no amount of surliness can shield Will's beauty and that's rather the point of this particular evening's showcase. Will is wearing a collared shirt, after all, that so easily hides the albatross spread of his neck, unmarked by Hannibal's teeth. A collar which Will now pulls on, even as his eyes roam over the guests. When they meet Hannibal's, he flushes and lowers his hand to adjust his coat sleeve instead.

"He is quite pretty, even if he is rather large," a fat, pallid man says to Hannibal in a stage whisper. He has a small, pursed mouth that makes each word sound wet and terrible.

Hannibal hums before excusing himself with a polite nod to survey the room.

"Dr. Lecter!"

Hannibal turns towards the sound and when his eyes fall on the beta who made it, he takes a pointed step back. "Franklyn," he says. "I must admit, I'm rather surprised to see you here."

Like an instinct, Ms. Komeda passes behind Franklyn and blows Hannibal a kiss. *You're welcome*, she mouths as she turns away with a flash of gold and a waft of leather and steel.

"And even more surprised," Hannibal continues, staring at Catherine as she winds her way back through the guests, "to learn you have, apparently, convinced your therapist to bring you."

Franklyn's jaw goes slack. He hunches forward. "How do you always do that? It's like you're magical, I swear."

"Hardly. I happen to understand Ms. Komeda's penchants better than most."

Franklyn's responding frown devolves into a pout as Hannibal turns back to him.

"How have you found your time with Ms. Komeda?" Hannibal asks.

"She's kind of bitchy," Franklyn says and blushes when Hannibal chuckles.

“I suppose it takes a particular type of person to appreciate her.”

“That’s not to say I don’t like her!”

Hannibal takes another step back to peruse a dish of hors d'oeuvres. He plucks a salmon rilette from the passing serving dish with the intent of bidding Franklyn farewell and of flaying Catherine alive for persistently indulging her worst impulses. But before he can return to the conversation, he feels a long press of subdued heat against his back. Franklyn’s eyes narrow.

Hannibal stills, delighted he hadn’t scented Will’s approach. He inhales with an open mouth to coat his tongue and lungs with the sticky-sweet scent of amber. He tilts his head towards one shoulder. “Will.”

“Doctor.” Will presses himself lightly against Hannibal’s spine. He extends an arm around Hannibal and towards the frowning beta. “Will.”

Hannibal can’t see Will’s mouth but is certain the greeting is accompanied by a placid smile turned sharp with teeth.

Franklyn’s eyes skip from Will to Hannibal and then back to Will. He extends his hand and grasps Will’s, wincing as he withdraws. “Franklyn.”

When Will says nothing but only perches his chin lightly on Hannibal’s shoulder, Franklyn fumbles through a goodbye and steers himself back towards Catherine.

Hannibal turns to Will, maintaining their proximity with a grip to each of Will’s wrists that the omega doesn’t pull away from. Hannibal leans in closer. “That was particularly unsubtle of you.”

“I don’t think he’d have appreciated subtlety. He’s been talking about you to anyone who’ll listen. Apparently, you two are *cheese folk*.”

“In that case, is your territory sufficiently marked for the evening?”

“Shut up.”

Will leans away from Hannibal but stops with a growl. Hannibal only has time to raise his eyebrows before Will lunges forward, pressing his cheek against Hannibal’s neck. With a sharp swipe of his head, Will mark Hannibal with his scent. Will’s eyes are unfocused and his teeth are bared when he pulls away.

Hannibal beams. “Satisfied?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Hannibal lets go of Will’s wrists, watching Will as he stalks back to the front door.

A moment later, Ms. Komeda appears at Hannibal’s side. “You always did prefer unmitigated disasters, Dr. Lecter. Perhaps our poor, dear, wilting Franklyn can abandon his constant hard-

on for you in favor of more attainable pursuits. If only you could shed yourself of similar circumstances.”

Hannibal notes the tension in Will’s shoulders as the omega rounds the corner towards the foyer. “You’re a merciless creature, Cathy.”

“Quite.”

* * * * *

Will stands in the foyer and wonders if he might turn to stone through concentrated effort alone. *Instincts*, he thinks with a vehemence that almost reaches his mouth. He tugs at the collar of his shirt. When a series of stitches pops in protest, he turns towards the stairs.

It’s been enough for one evening.

He ducks into the kitchen, around the fluttering black-on-white circles made by the catering staff, and down the long, darkened hallway to the study. He wants only a single drink, a few long swallows of something warm and earthy to ensure sleep finds him easily tonight. He’ll deal with the fallout for abandoning the party tomorrow.

Will scents the alpha long before his eyes adjust to the dimmed lighting in the hallway. Hannibal had warned him he prefers his guests mingle in manor’s eastern-most rooms – the living and dining room, in particular – and has, in turn, long conditioned them to avoid meandering about where the lights are turned low. Will had responded with a flippant, “Yeah, okay, doctor,” and an eyeroll. But now, in the dim overhead lighting, he pauses as a primordial tug at his gut advises he move back towards the light of the kitchen.

“Well, hello, Mr. Graham. I was wondering if we might meet.”

Will absorbs the alpha’s presence in pieces: a neat jaw, a rounded stomach, a cruel, jovial mouth. It all coalesces to reveal a graying man on the harder side of middle aged. Even in the darkened hall, Will can see that the irises of the alpha’s eyes are more black than red and swallowed by dilated pupils. Pupils which dilate further as Will stops a few feet before him.

The alpha stands squarely in the middle of the hallway, one hand holding a champagne flute, the other in his pocket. It’s a gesture that might have been casual but for the open hunger in his expression. Will looks away, down, and presses at the collar of his shirt where the broken stitches have forced the fabric to rest oddly against his neck.

“Please, allow me,” the alpha says. He takes a step towards Will.

Will takes a step back. The alpha smiles but, to Will’s relief, stops.

The man looks at a painting tacked to the wall beside him and clicks his tongue. When he speaks, his voice is slow and careful. “Your master does have such an unusual taste in the artistic. Such odd aesthetics. I mean, really, *Leda and the Swan* in the dining room, of all things. Hannibal Lecter does not appreciate subtly. No, he does not. Unless-“ he turns to Will,

a smile quivering at the edges of his mouth, “has he found success in his attempts to seduce you?”

“Is the shamelessly unsubtle Dr. Lecter *fucking* me? Is that what you’re asking?” There’s heat in Will’s words, but he still pats his collar and smooths his tie against his shirt, suddenly unsure what to do with his hands.

“I see your point,” the alpha says. “Perhaps a better question would be to ask if you’ve bonded.”

Will shoves his hands in his pockets. “Are you even allowed to ask me that? Sorry, but who are you, exactly?”

“Oh, yes, but of course, Dr. Abel Gideon. A colleague of your master.”

Dr. Gideon doesn’t extend his hand but tilts his head. His gaze roams across Will. In truth, Will is hard-pressed to call the look anything but clinical. Still, his pulse hitches below his ear.

“Unusual aesthetics, yes. You are quite large for your kind, aren’t you, Mr. Graham? Sharper features. An aggressive jut to your chin. Yes, yes, there can be no doubt your master’s tastes are unusual.” He meets Will’s eyes. “But no less stunning for it. As it is, I, too, have a certain appetite for the unusual and stunning.”

Will’s tongue is heavy in his mouth. “You’re a collector.”

The alpha’s eyebrows jump towards his hairline. Will inhales, anticipating the sweet, tangy lemon-lime scent of *surprise* or the fetid bite of *outrage*. He can’t stop the keening noise that escapes him when the simmering low burn of woodfire and must of *annoyance* and *greed* strike him instead.

“Oh, now, there’s no need to sling such wild accusations about.” Gideon takes another slow step towards Will. With a smile that bares his teeth, the alpha says, “That’s not to say, of course, I don’t find myself in the habit of . . . acquisition, for the benefit of others.” Another step. “And you, dearest one, would be a crown jewel amongst someone’s most treasured rubble.”

“Will?”

Will jumps. It’s only then that he realizes how close he’s allowed the alpha to get. From this distance, he can no longer absorb the aging man in pieces but must see him as he stands in whole.

The peppery, smoky scent of the alpha’s skin licks flames down Will’s nose and throat. Will turns his head away, keeping his chin low to hide his neck.

As footsteps approach from behind, the alpha leans in closer and inhales deeply, his lips parting. “Dr. Chilton warned me you had not taken kindly to your gender. But my goodness, just look at you. Prey will, after all, always have the instincts of prey.”

“Will, hey, I was just – Dr. Gideon?”

The alpha straightens. His eyes are dull as they scan a painting on the wall beside Will. He takes a sip from his champagne flute. “Well, hello, Matthew. Dr. Chilton mentioned you might be his plus one this fine evening.”

The moment Will feels the heat of Matthew next to him, he grips Matthew's sleeve and then, before he can stop himself, turns to bury his face into his chest. He clutches at the back of Matthew's suit jacket and inhales slowly to allow Matthew's unobtrusive scent to wash away the fire burning along his trachea.

With his ear to Matthew's chest, Will can feel him speaking. He can hear the alpha is replying, though he can't make out the words over the thrashing sound of water in his head. A few moments later, Matthew walks them further down the hallway and into the study. The alpha's scent recedes.

Will's fingers tighten at Matthew's back. With a relief that summons a quiet purr from Will, Matthew returns the embrace gently. Soft, warm hands skirt along Will's arms, his sides, his hips, before resting gently at his lower back. The chest beneath him rumbles with a low laugh and Will grits his teeth even as his purr deepens.

“Hello, Will.”

“What are you doing here?” he asks into Matthew's chest.

“Dr. Chilton wanted to check in. I guess he hasn't heard from Dr. Lecter since your last group therapy session. Doc Bloom was worried, too.”

Matthew's shirt is rough and scratchy and smells of detergent and a wooden dresser. It's all Will can do not to rip through the back of it as he clutches harder. “Stop laughing.”

“Sorry.” Matthew lifts Will's chin with a soft finger. “I didn't think you'd be so happy to see me.”

“Bullshit. You missed me, too.”

“I did,” Matthew says and pulls Will close enough to capture his mouth.

Will kisses him back like a teenager, all teeth and tongue.

Matthew laughs again and pulls away enough to press his nose to Will's temple. “You only kiss me like that when you're in heat and don't have your head on straight.”

“I *don't* have my head on straight.” Will tugs them both further into the study so they can be shrouded in darkness.

The emotions that leak from the beta – *sadness, regret, desire, fear* – send Will into a frenzy of panic that calms only when Matthew's face is again between his hands. “Kiss me,” Will demands and Matthew obeys.

Will pushes Matthew backwards by increments until the back of Matthew's knees hit the leather sofa and he falls into it. Will straddles him, his fingers spread around the buttons of Matthew's shirt so he can feel the warm skin underneath. One of Matthew's hands wraps around the back of Will's head, the other kneading soft circles into Will's thigh. Matthew's fingers skim closer, closer, closer to the heat pooling in Will's groin.

"Jesus," Will breathes against Matthew's neck. "Can't you just adopt me?"

Matthew's low chuckle causes goosebumps to riot down Will's back. "Home, not adopt. And I would if I could afford you. And if mama didn't mind."

Will snorts and then moans to cover the noise. He takes one of Matthew's earlobes between his teeth. "Mama, huh?"

"Yes'sir."

"You don't think mama'd like me?"

"I think . . ." Matthew begins, pulling gently but with insistence on a lock of Will's curls. Will resists long enough for the tug to turn sharp before he leans into it, exposing his neck. Matthew's golden eyes darken to pale umber. "I think . . ."

"I think you like me." Will's hips spasm forward as Matthew tightens his grip on Will's hair. "I think you might like me enough to take me away from here."

"Oh, Will."

Will moans as Matthew's fingers spring to his groin, palming the length of Will through his trousers. He grinds down on Matthew's lap and is rewarded with another quick yank on his hair. Both of Matthew's hands grip Will's ass, bringing their bodies together with a flash of heat that sets Will's skin alight.

Matthew looks pained. "I would give anything to have you at the institute right now."

"You might be in luck. I'm pre-heat now." Will runs an open-mouthed kiss against Matthew's jaw. "Why don't you remind me why I should come back."

"Indeed, Matthew. Do tell us."

Will's pulse hitches and then begins clambering unsteadily in his chest.

Hannibal stands in the doorway to the study, his feet spread shoulder width apart and his hands clasped behind his back.

Will scents the air but can only smell his own arousal and a faint streak of terror rising from Matthew. "Hannibal," Will says, "I-"

Hannibal neither moves nor looks at Will, but something within the alpha shifts, as though the molecules just outside his body breathe in all at once. With it, Will is momentarily

blinded by an assault of scents, both too powerful and too fleeting to identify with certainty – except for one.

Rage. He smells like rage.

“Matthew,” Will whines in a voice far higher than his usual voice. Beside him, vines sprout from the crevices of the couch.

“Dr. Lecter, I’m sorry,” Matthew says. He tips Will off of him to stand, moving away from Will’s grasping hands. The atmosphere grows humid. “I’m really, really sorry. I’ll leave.”

“Matthew,” Will tries again but the beta’s name is drowned out by a crack of lightning. Matthew hunches forward and skirts around Hannibal. Only when he is behind the alpha does he glance back at Will. The age lines around his eyes bunch with the effort of whatever memory is being pulled from him at the scent of Will’s fear. The rest of him is apologetic and tentative.

“D-Dr. Lecter, if I may-” Matthew says, holding his hands out as a visible shudder rolls down the alpha’s spine.

Will can’t hear the rest of what’s said over the cacophony of rushing water in his head.

Hannibal closes the study doors. Sweat prickles at the nape of Will’s neck as Matthew turns from the doorway and disappears down the hallway.

Hannibal takes a step towards him.

“I swear to god I’ll scream,” Will says in a voice a few decibels too quiet and a few octaves too high.

“And embarrass me further in my own home?” Hannibal takes another step.

“Hannibal, don’t.”

“Fasten your pants, please.”

The deluge of the approaching thunderstorm hits them both. Will scrubs at his face to free it of the pelting rain but Hannibal remains still, his hair and clothes growing heavy and soft in the downpour. They stare at each other until Will’s vision began to blur.

Suddenly, Will feels a scream bubble in his chest. *“I’m not prey.”*

Hannibal glances up and to the side as the foliage of the bayou blooms around them. In rare form, there are small gunshots of scent leaking from him. Will frantically tries to clear his mind so he can catalogue the emotions as they reach him.

Foremost are *shock* and *wonder* as Hannibal tilts his head back to the ceiling to feel the rain because, for the first time in as long as Will can remember, he’s actually summoned a thunderstorm.

Fury. He shouts the word in his head, trying to catalogue it. *Embarrassment*. *A visceral desire to punish Matthew and a similar, softer desire to punish me*, though he can tell that each stirs for different reasons.

Will shakes his head with a small, desperate noise and scents and scents and scents. He breathes and he breathes.

Lesser, smaller, but just as potent, is *sadness, fear, longing*, and, spread like a thin, sticky membrane across them all, *rejection*.

Will swallows as the emotions coalesce into a single thought that pours from the alpha as though Hannibal has said the words out loud: *Why do you desire the orderly over me?*

“Hannibal-“ Will begins, only to stop when Hannibal looks at him. “I’m sorry.”

Beside Will, an array of white summer blossoms erupts between the books lining the walls. The scents of milkweed and bushmint and the fragrant plume of lizard’s tail swirl around them.

“What could I have done to avoid this evening’s outcome?” Hannibal asks. “Better yet, what have I done, how poorly do you believe I’ve treated you, to deserve witnessing you and the orderly?”

A quiet, thin stream of fury twists under Will’s fingers. He balls them into fists. “This isn’t about you.”

Hannibal looks again around the study. As he does, some of his tension begins to uncoil. He unclenches his fingers, relaxes his shoulders, puts his weight onto one hip.

He holds out his hand and watches the rain collect in the crevices of his palm. “You are indeed a singular creature, Will Graham,” he says before leaving Will alone to his hurricane.

The Firestorm

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will feel the fall out from the dinner party. Hannibal manipulates Will for days. Will is helpless to stop him.

Hannibal can't sleep.

He spends a fretful few hours tossing in his bed but finds his sheets wrap uncomfortably around his legs. His pillows cave too willingly under his head and bunch too forcibly under his neck. His desire is feeble as he grips his flaccid cock, his libido drowned to uselessness by the sound of Will pleading with the orderly to take him home. Eventually, he rises.

He retrieves a pair of dark silk pajama bottoms and a similarly soft robe from his dresser.

He dodders over the Belgian press in his kitchen.

He stands by the open study door with a cup of coffee.

He doesn't know whether it was intent or a function of Will's enhanced abilities, but the thunderstorm only truly wreaked havoc near the door where Hannibal had stood and the leather sofa where Will had sat. The rest of the study is peppered in water droplets, of course, though all of it will be easy enough to repair. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the next day. His contractor will overcharge him with poorly hidden glee, but the work will be impeccable.

By some miracle, Hannibal had managed to change into a dry outfit similar enough to the one he'd been wearing that only Ms. Komeda had raised an eyebrow when he'd reappeared in the dining room. A generous tip to one of the beefier caterers ensured the young man stood like a boulder between the kitchen and the hallway until the guests left. Will had long since disappeared somewhere into the manor.

Hannibal takes his coffee into his home office. He spends the better part of an hour seated at his desk, Will's file from the institute open before him. He tries reading the redacted pages containing the names, addresses, and photographs of the alphas that had previously homed Will. Yet, despite his efforts, he can't see through the blacked-out text any better than he can see through the file itself.

He has energy to burn; enough to consider whether the bar off Charles Street might still be open. He checks his watch and when his cock gives a weary but noticeable twitch in response to the time, abandons the papers.

He dons his jacket and a scarf and returns to the office to retrieve his phone when Will finds him.

The omega is still dressed in Hannibal's pajama bottoms, still without socks or shirt or undergarments. His face is puffy from sleep and the curls on one side of his head are standing erect.

Will says, "Where are you going?"

"Are you having trouble sleeping?" Hannibal asks, buttoning his coat. "I have medication that may help."

Will nods and then shakes his head, responding to the questions in turn. He rubs an eye with the back of one hand and yawns hugely, not bothering to cover his mouth. Otherwise, he makes no effort to move closer or leave.

Hannibal hesitates. It's a vivid image that exists in the room between them, though only Hannibal can see it.

It's the image of the devastating arc of Will's spine as the orderly had stroked Will through the suit Hannibal had bought for him. In the image, Will's mouth is open wide, his brow furrowed, his head thrown back. It's an exact replica of how he'd looked the moment Hannibal had found them.

Hannibal fights the urge to look away from it. Soon enough, the image dissolves and another takes its place. This one shows Hannibal the wide, easy smile Will had given the beta in return for his touch.

Across the room, Will stands like a child, limp-limbed and soft with sleep, chewing at the inside of his lower lip. His eyes flicker to Hannibal as Hannibal takes a step towards the hallway.

The curve of Will's mouth has been sketched, drawn, shaded, and recreated in every medium Hannibal knows. Sometimes the lips sneer or frown or come together in a wide, low line that Hannibal's sharpest pencil or lightest touch cannot soften. In watercolor, they are blurry and relaxed as Will sleeps. In pen, they are brutally cruel.

Those images fan out before Hannibal, too. They hang next to the picture of Will's easy smile.

Hannibal smiles through the image of Will to the omega beyond, who has one elbow clutched in his opposite hand. His return smile is tentative.

It's not a desire to possess Will that causes Hannibal to say, "Lie down." He feels no urge to conquer even as the omega collapses onto the sofa in a soft, rumpled heap. The blankets Hannibal retrieves from the far side of the office are closer to a gesture of good will than anything else, founded, perhaps, on the wispy scent of fear that still clings to Will. The act of opening and spreading a few of the blankets across Will is little more than a call to instinct: the behavior of any reasonable alpha in the care of an omega.

It's Hannibal's decision to place a few more blankets, still folded, on the ground by Will's head and his assurance – "There are more blankets here if you need them" – that tips the

scales.

He *must* go to Charles Street.

Hannibal straightens, every muscle he has aching for him to head to his car, but he stops when Will's hand shoots from beneath the covers to loosely grip his wrist.

"Will?"

Will's fingers tighten.

Hannibal caves at once. "Lift your head," he says as he removes his coat.

Will's groan is petulant. Still, he allows Hannibal to lower himself onto the sofa and gently pull Will's head into his lap. Hannibal is careful to give Will enough room to lie comfortably, as far or as close to his torso as he prefers.

Hannibal must swallow a purr as Will shimmies himself down, pressing the back of his head into Hannibal's stomach. Pressure builds in a slow ache against the piano wire.

Hannibal laces his fingers through the messy sprawl of Will's curls. Will doesn't purr or press into the touch, but neither does he pull away.

"Your beta orderly informed me of what he believes transpired between you and Dr. Gideon. I'm sorry it happened." As Hannibal speaks, he lays his palm flat against Will's skull. He checks the omega's pulse as well as the tension in his neck and shoulders. When nothing changes, he continues to stroke his hair. "I'm afraid I had an inkling of what Dr. Gideon might be, though I clearly overestimated his need for self-preservation in favor of his appetites. If it at all brings you peace, know that he was escorted from the manor immediately and will not be returning."

"And Matthew?"

"He had already departed."

Will inhales. "You're lying."

"You're mistaken," Hannibal says, and then, as Will tries to rise, "No, listen. He'd already departed, before Dr. Gideon. But, yes, you're correct – had he not, I would have also asked him to leave. There are forever different levels of social decorum at play and more than one was breached tonight."

Will sighs but settles back on Hannibal's lap. He grips the fold of Hannibal's silk pants near his knee, twisting the material between his thumb and the tip of his index finger. "Gideon-" he starts but cuts himself off with a swallow.

"I know." Hannibal pushes the curls from Will's forehead. "Which is why I apologized first. You needed comfort, to feel safe after such a brutish encounter and, so, clung to the orderly. You needed, Will, and listened to that need."

“But you’d hoped I might seek you out, instead.”

“The orderly was closer,” Hannibal says, the words burning a clean line up his throat.

“Still, you hoped.” Before Hannibal can respond, Will shakes his head. “Don’t. You already smell like a lie.”

“I haven’t lied to you.”

“Or, whatever it is. Maybe not a lie, but like . . . I don’t know. Insincerity? Deception?” Will opens his eyes though he keeps his gaze fixed on the other side of the room. Still quiet, still docile, he says, “Whatever it is, you should probably work on your long game.”

“My long game.”

“Yeah.” Will wriggles until he’s on his back. His eyes are bright and narrowed as he catches Hannibal’s gaze. The omega inhales shamelessly through his mouth, the edge of his lips ticking at whatever scents he registers. “I mean, what’s the end game, here? What happens when you conquer the proditor? When you finally bring me to heel? What then? You’re just going to be return me? Why put the effort into deceiving me, then?”

Hannibal’s fingers skim Will’s furrowed brow, which relaxes under his touch. Will’s gaze stays fixed on him. “Are you conquerable? Can you be brought to heel?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Will says. “But I know you want it.”

Hannibal’s fingers continue to roam against the crest of Will’s cheek, the curve of his ear, down his long, bared neck growing warm and flushed under the attention. He slips his fingers around Will’s soft, unmarked neck with soft, marked fingers that do not grip, do not flex, but only touch.

His instincts are smug and silent.

Will’s eyes widen and then narrow, his pupils constricting. “Is that really all it is?” he says, ducking his chin until Hannibal’s fingers are against his neck properly. “You just want to possess me? Until you’re bored and feel fit to return me? It’s really that simple?”

From the depth of Hannibal’s abdomen, he pulls forth the feelings that have been growing in the damp and gloom with a speed that’s been alarming him and tosses them into the air. “I would be surprised indeed to ever find myself bored of you.”

He’s in love with Will.

It’s a truth he feels in the marrow of his bones. He hadn’t expected it, certainly wouldn’t have wished it upon himself. No amount of soul- or memory-searching had given him a precise date or time when it had first taken root. Instead, somewhere between when Will had summoned the hurricane and one of the countless times the omega had sneered at him, it had simply *been*. And he’d become aware of it the moment he found Will with the orderly.

Will's cheeks flush an enchanting rose-dark. His scowl is a light across a graveyard. "I think you just don't know what to make of me."

Hannibal dips his head to the omega's curly hair, pleased, *so pleased* that Will doesn't flinch or pull away. The warm strands smell like honey and life. "I think, Will, that it is you that does not know what to make of me."

"Yeah, I do," Will says, arching a little into the touch of Hannibal's fingertips across his chest. "You're not so different than most alphas. Better than some, worse than others. But you're no different, not really."

Hannibal smiles, grazing his fingers across where the elastic band of Will's pants dig a little into the doughy flesh of his stomach. Will shivers and closes his eyes.

Hannibal hums. His index finger dips under the band, lifting the fabric to see the little divots left on Will's stomach. Divots that had not been there a week before. Hannibal runs his thumb across them. His index finger trails the hair below Will's bellybutton, and he watches Will's body respond with a sigh. The way the omega's back arches ever so slightly in a long, pleased roll as Hannibal traces his fingers higher is a delight. The way his sharp smile is cut short by furrowed brows and parted lips as Hannibal's nails lightly skim his pectoral muscles makes him feel worshipful.

"I may be no better or worse than other alphas," Hannibal says, avoiding Will's nipples in favor of running his thumb against the peak of Will's clavicle. "But you are something extraordinary."

Will makes an acquiescent sort of noise in the back of his throat. Flippant, meaningless. His acknowledgement no more than a reason to stare half-blind at Hannibal as he considers Hannibal's expression.

Will's eyes roam quickly, from Hannibal's irises to forehead to the upturned curve of his mouth to his chin. Finally, Will turns away.

Hannibal releases a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"For all your mediocrity, you do thin the nightmares," Will says.

Hannibal must close his eyes and turn his head up and away when a soft, tentative purr begins to rumble low in Will's chest.

* * * * *

A few nights later, Will absconds from the house.

Hannibal watches Will comb the manor for days, flailing between conflicting desires Hannibal hasn't been able to identify but which seem to pull the omega's body in different directions.

It is, of course, no surprise at all that Will's ultimate decision is destructive.

Hannibal smells rather than hears Will pass the open door between the study and the hallway. He spends a few moments pleased over how well the omega's delicate frame and soft, sinuous construction allow for such leonine grace. Still, he locks the manor's front door the moment Will leaves.

Hours later, long after his anticipation has dwindled to boredom, he hears Will's frantic attempts to let himself back inside: the repeated click-thrust of the keyed handleset followed by a hollower thump as he smacks his head or a fist against the door, each thump followed by a muffled "fuck."

Hannibal rises and pauses before opening the front door to catch his expression in the large mirror by the coatrack. Calm but concerned. A generous God moments from facing a wayward sycophant. An effort that's entirely wasted at the sight of Will.

The omega is on his knees, his hands flat against the snow-swept porch, his head down and the side of his neck exposed. He seems not entirely capable (*or willing*) to contort himself properly into a breeding lordosis, but nevertheless presents such an appealing figure that Hannibal is struck silent.

"Come inside, Will," he says after a handful of heartbeats. He steps to the side and opens the door further.

Will blushes so deeply that even the blacks, grays, and whites summoned by the colorless night fail to hide it. He begins to crawl painfully, slowly, *angrily* into the house.

The piano wire gives a hard, painful tug even as heat begins gathering in his groin. Before he recalls considering it, Hannibal is bent to catch one of Will's arms. "Stand up," he hisses. "Now."

Will freezes. "What?"

"Now."

The omega rises gracelessly. "I-I don't understand, that's what . . . that's how . . . it's what we're taught, I--"

Hannibal pulls him closer, his grip still tight on Will's arm. "I have no patience for what you *think* I want from you. What I will not stand for, however, is for you to present yourself as though you are no more than a downtrodden dog deserving of a final kick from its master. Have I made myself clear?"

He tugs Will into the foyer and slams the door behind him.

"No," Will says and then immediately looks like he regrets it. "Look, just . . . no. I'm not trying to be difficult--"

Hannibal inhales deeply. "You smell of fire and smoke. Are you injured?"

"No," Will says. He scans Hannibal's face, his head dipped down in a small show of deference, quiet but alert. "Look, I just . . . I needed to get out for a bit."

Hannibal raises his hand to Will's neck. For a wonder, the omega remains still as Hannibal gently pulls aside the lapel of his jacket. "You're not wearing a collar."

"No, I—" Will looks at the ground. "Honestly, I didn't even think about it."

Hannibal exhales through his nose. "I can appreciate the desire. But if you, an unaccompanied omega in the middle of the night, had been caught, I alone would have borne the penalty. I'd like to think that wasn't your intent, even if it was the only probable outcome."

Will's hands jump at his sides. He flinches, balling them into fists. "I didn't think of that either." He looks at Hannibal from the corners of his eyes. "I could really use a drink."

They move to the study. Despite the clinging weight of curiosity and entitlement that eats at the edges of Hannibal's mind, he resumes his work. Retrieving the voice recorder from the edge of his desk, he positions himself on the sofa before the fire, only partly engrossed as he makes low-voiced notes into the small device.

After fidgeting to the point of distraction, Will leaves the study to return wearing Hannibal's silk pajama bottoms. They are still absurdly long on the omega's lithe frame and still, Hannibal notes, without the accompaniment of socks, a shirt, or undergarments.

Will stands by the fireplace, balancing a worn copy of a political manifesto in one hand, swirling a tumbler of scotch in the other. The firelight wreaks havoc on the panes of his back. His muscles sink and spring to life in the wavering light. Hannibal watches the shadows bloom and recede, feeling a similar, empathic leap at his own muscles. It's almost as if he's actively consuming each twitch of flesh, of each brief pass of surprise, humor, and distaste that skips along the omega's face as he absorbs what he reads.

There's an ache gathering weight in his chest. The unoccupied parts of his brain are thinking the same thought, loud and in tandem: *to how many other alphas has Will presented himself so beautifully?* He imagines a dozen different eyes seeing a half-dozen different Wills on his knees, bent and gloriously, *furiously* bright in his contrived submission.

He lets the thought go.

Will is here and he is *his*.

Still, the low-burning anger remains.

He looks at Will. "What about being omegan disagrees with you so profoundly?"

The noise Will makes, not quite a laugh, dies quickly. He approaches the bar with purpose only to stare at it for a moment, eyeing the various bottles and decanters. Finally, he plucks one and unscrews the top. "You're ridiculous."

"Tell me."

The pendulum swings. "Because it's a ridiculous thing to say." When Hannibal doesn't respond, Will cocks his head. "So, what, you're telling me there's a timeline in which you'd

happily choose to be an omega? Say it. Tell me there is. Look me in the eye and say it.”

“There is no alternate universe where, if given the choice, I would choose to be omegan.”

“Of course there’s not.” Will raises his empty glass to Hannibal in a mock salute before tipping the contents of the unscrewed bottle into it. “So, stop pretending I’m being stupid.”

“The issue,” Hannibal says, “is not one of choice. It’s that your perception is causing you, in this life you did not choose, such tumult. If you cannot avoid your gender, cannot succumb to it, you might benefit from accepting it.”

“*Accepting it*,” Will spits back in a perfect imitation of Hannibal’s accent. A dribble of whiskey falls from his chin and onto his bare chest. Hannibal’s gaze follows Will’s hand as it wipes at his throat, the soft fuzz of his chest, and then down the side of his pants to dry against Hannibal’s fine silk. “*Accepting it*. But that’s not really what you mean is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s not. You say ‘acceptance’ but what you mean is obedience. Deference. Control. You demand it in your demand-less way without giving anything in return. You claim you want equality but you’re just as full of shit as I went back home tonight, all right? I went home but the heat was disconnected, so I built a fire and that’s the whole story. Okay? And for the record, I don’t have to *accept* anything.”

“If you insist on full disclosure, Will, as you so often have, I must insist on the same. I assume you did not *walk* back to Wolf Trap, no matter how strong your desire to return home.”

Will flinches, his shoulders hiking up to his ears.

“The orderly drove you?”

Will covers the rim of his glass with his palm.

Will looks down at his glass when Hannibal does. For a moment, Hannibal is sure Will is protecting the whiskey, anticipating it’ll be removed as punishment for his emotionality. He opens his mouth, not quite decided on whether to soothe or inflame the anxiety building within Will, but stops when Will begins to purr.

“I-“ Hannibal stops again when Will breathes out a long, piercing whine.

The noise spreads across the study like a flood, chasing and devouring the purr. *Ratatat-tat* and another rapid-fire purr follows.

“Will,” Hannibal says softly. He opens his palms and extends his arms – *transparency*, *warmth* – meeting the omega’s soft noises with his own calming purr. It’s a deeper, richer, more persistent sound and has the intended effect: after a few moments and a deep, shuddering breath, Will removes his hand from the top of the glass to slump against the bar.

Hannibal says, “You are no longer required to tend to your own needs so voraciously. I will, of course, not force you to do anything,” he adds as Will glowers, “but efforts to self-soothe, as emotionally and physically draining as they are, are unnecessary when you have an alpha nearby interested in tending to them.”

Will’s eyes widen and a furious blush begins to crawl up his neck.

“I apologize,” Hannibal says. He must fight the urge to smile. “I do understand why your gender sits so poorly with you. In truth, it was the thought of the orderly-“

“Yes, Hannibal, yes. *Matthew* drove me. Because he’s a friend and he cares about me and so he drove me.” Will laughs a small, heavy laugh. “You know what, you don’t get to do this. You don’t get to sit there, smug and righteous after you’re the one who came back from a bar smelling like sex and demanding-”

“Careful, Will.”

The edges of the omega’s mouth spread into a painful, open-mouthed smile. “Careful, Will? *Careful, Will?*” He bares his teeth. “Do you plan on beating me, then? Returning me to the institute? Getting Matthew fired? What? What stupid, petulant, petty little alphan thing do you plan on doing to punish me for doing less than what you did with some random guy at a bar?”

Recalling Will’s file from the institute, the police reports describing the flawless carnage he’d inflicted on homing alphas who’d dared laid a finger on him, Hannibal turns on the couch so he can face Will properly. In a low voice meant to placate, he says, “I am asking you to be careful not to say something you may struggle to unsay.”

“Like what?” Will snaps, holding up an open palm to Hannibal. It returns quickly to cover his glass. “What terrible, awful thing could I possibly say right now that would undermine your ridiculous self-control? What, that I let Matthew fuck me in the backseat of his car? That I *begged* him for it? It certainly wouldn’t be the first time. Or that I told him the bleeding-heart idiot of an alpha that purchased me offered to send me back to the institute when I go into heat because-”

Jealousy, distaste, and fury flood Hannibal all at once. “You can’t provoke me into laying hands on you. As such, I’d appreciate it if you’d stop trying.”

Will pauses, his face flushed. Hannibal thinks the omega’s ire may be withering until, with a shudder that Hannibal almost mirrors for how violently it rips through Will’s spine, Will says, “You want to know when I accepted I was omegan, Dr. Lecter?” He says the words quickly, *savagely*, his lips sneering over Hannibal’s name. He presses away from the bar with his hip to stalk towards the sofa. A fiery, charcoal scent is lifting from his skin. “You want to know that precise, perfect little moment I watched everything I’d known about myself go up in ash?”

“Will-“

“*Two days*, doctor, two days into a heat, an entire forty-eight *fucking* hours that I had been locked in a basement. No light, no food, a case of water, and a fucking bucket.” Will makes a noise that might have been a laugh but that twitches, half-conscious in his mouth. “And when the alpha finally came to fetch me, do you know what I did?”

“You-“

“*Shut up*,” Will snarls, throwing an arm out at Hannibal to stop him. “You know what I did? I smiled at him and I purred. Because I was just so fucking relieved to see him. All of my . . . my integrity, my dignity, laid bare . . . and that’s when I thought oh, well, damn, I must be omega if I could be locked in someone’s basement for two fucking days and still present myself to him covered in my own slick like a child who’d smashed his face in a birthday cake. And you know what? That thought didn’t leave my head until long after he took me back to the institute. All I could do for days was gnaw at the bars and ask any passing fucking orderly *where my alpha was*.”

A bright eruption of white light momentarily blinds Hannibal. As instinctual as Will’s exploration of the manor and as impossible to control, a bubbling, vibrant atom of hot anguish and fury blossoms in his diaphragm. At first, he tries to swallow the noise, unsure of its effect on the omega, *his omega*, who’s now standing frozen and wide-eyed. With effort, with considerable, *draining* effort, Hannibal unclenches his teeth and brings his lips back together. As he clears his throat, the last of his trembling roar dies.

Will looks horrified. “*You don’t get to do that*,” he cries. “You *purchased* me! You don’t get to feel bad about what others do with their property when you did the same fucking thing. You don’t get to feel anything about-about *anything* for Matthew when you’re free to fuck whatever pretty little boy you happen to find at a bar. I mean, Jesus, you spend the past few months distant, weird, pretending we’re not exactly what we fucking are, all while still somehow being clearly fucking crazy about me and what do you—what is it—what the fuck am I doing here? Why did you bring me here? What do you want from me? *Tell me!*”

A scent reaches Hannibal. *Fire*, hot and vibrant in this throat and lungs as though his entire study has suddenly gone up in flames.

“No, it’s-“ Will starts but stops when Hannibal rises from the couch. The omega looks up at him with wide eyes, his hand back to perch absurdly over the rim of his glass.

Hannibal pulls Will to him, thrusting Will’s head into his underarm. Will presses himself against Hannibal hard, cupping his body to Hannibal’s side in a shaking parenthesis that reminds Hannibal of the omega when he’s soft and sweet asleep.

With Will tucked securely under his arm, Hannibal replaces the ripping snarl in his throat and sternum with a soothing purr. Will leans in harder

“*Stop it*,” Will cries suddenly with the sharp, salty-sweet tang of fear. He squirms from Hannibal’s grip.

A cannon burst of ash rains from the ceiling.

Just as he had with the rain, that wondrous, shrieking hurricane, Hannibal's mind grows slow and dimwitted. He watches the ash as it coats the shiny marble inlay before the fireplace, the bookcases, the red chair Will favors. He opens his palm to it and watches it land in the crevices of his hand.

He releases Will. The omega takes a slow step back.

Hannibal rubs his fingers together, both surprised and not to find his touch absent of the scratchy feel of burnt wood. When he opens his palm, he sees the debris gathered there remain steadily in place, spread as evenly as they'd fallen.

He looks at Will, who's breathing heavily, his body arched towards Hannibal as though he means to lunge. Absently, Hannibal extends his arm, presenting the gathered ash to the scowling creature.

They stay like that for a long time until, slowly, Will's shoulders relax. He inspects Hannibal's hand with wary interest.

The pendulum recedes. "I know it's not real," Will says, shaking his head so a flurry of ash spills around them. He takes a deep breath and only then removes his palm from the top of his glass. His expression is wary as he flicks his eyes to Hannibal's. "I still don't like drinking it."

Hannibal hums, unable to recall his voice.

* * * * *

Will doesn't understand Hannibal's expression when he's roused the next morning.

The little light that seeps through the wooden slats covering the bay window throws odd portions of Hannibal's body into relief: half of one hand held loosely at his thigh, the area where his chest and stomach meet, one eye that smolders somewhere between red and black.

His face is blank.

He smells of nothing.

Will searches his memory, shuffling through brief images of the various scenes of his life. He pauses, reaches for one when he was ten years old. It's the reverse of a photograph Will kept with him for years after his father passed; an image of him in fishing waders far too large, a fishing pole comprised more of cracks than actual fiberglass held in one hand. A large-mouthed bass in the other. His smile is huge and full of missing teeth.

"Lemme teach you a trick," his father had said from behind a disposable camera. "Stay right there, right where you are, but move the fish a bit closer. Just the fish, now. Raise it a bit, a little more." He'd winked. "It'll make it look bigger."

In his bedroom, Will lets the pleasure of the memory spread through his veins. When it reaches his fingers, he unclenches the bedding and presses his palms flat to the silk sheets, willing Hannibal to feel it, too.

Hannibal's one red eye follows the flex of Will's fingers. To them, he says, "Come. Breakfast will be ready shortly."

At the kitchen island, something is creeping up Will's throat like slime. It clots and grows tacky when Hannibal places a sparse omelet before him. Will doesn't need to eat it to know what it is; the non-scents of eggs, cheese, salt, and pepper are individual leaves all festering on the same bland bush. He lifts one edge with his fork while Hannibal busies himself at the coffee press to peer inside.

Nothing.

Next to the sink, Hannibal's partially eaten breakfast stands abandoned. Bacon. Ham. Cut vegetables. A half-demolished mash of something that looks like hashbrowns. Good, solid food. Will looks back down at his omelet and cuts a small slice.

A shrieking cacophony is building in his head.

Hannibal leans against the opposite edge of the island, his back to Will, and stares out the window above the sink. He sips from his glass coffee mug. He hasn't made a cup for Will.

"Is everything okay?" Will asks. Hannibal turns his head a little towards him. "You seem, I don't know, kind of off or weird or something."

"Off or weird or something."

The omelet tastes like nothing. "Yeah. And, look, I know things have been—" Will pauses, winces "-weird, all around, and seriously, I'm really sorry about Matthew and about leaving and about, you know, the ash and yelling last night and—" The apology dies behind Will's teeth as Hannibal turns to look at him.

There's a reptilian coolness to Hannibal's expression. Will can feel how wide his own eyes are as he looks back. He can't remember how to speak.

Prey will, after all, always have the instincts of prey.

It's with the same detached coolness that Hannibal places his mostly full cup of coffee next to Will's plate. "You may have the rest." From the breast pocket of his suit, he retrieves a soft, flat length of leather and puts it beside the coffee. Will looks at it. The clasp is unbroken. "Please dress and join me in the car when you're finished. The collar is non-negotiable."

In the driveway, Will begins to drown. He'd grabbed one of Hannibal's scarves from the limbed coatrack in the foyer, intending to hide the collar under it, but finds it held limply in one hand as he gets into the car. Once belted, he pulls the edge of his jacket down and tilts his throat towards Hannibal with an exaggerated coyness to show him the collar. The gesture is ruined by the panic welling behind his breastbone and how stupid he feels doing it.

Hannibal says nothing.

Dread oozes up and out of Will's stomach to fill his chest cavity as they drive. He takes a deep breath to dislodge it, but finds it holds fast between his lungs and ribcage. Without

breath, he says, “Where are we going?”

“An appointment, nothing more.”

Hannibal rounds a long, sweeping corner, and the panic flares into something tangible as the heart of the city recedes.

“Hannibal, where are you taking me?”

Will isn’t familiar with downtown Baltimore. He couldn’t have said with anything like certainty where they are. He doesn’t recognize the streets, the shops, or the neat, printed words in white lettering on state-issued green signs marking local spots of interest that pass by as Hannibal drives.

From a great distance, he feels Hannibal still. The white-on-green text of *Baltimore State Institute for Omegan Welfare* perched on an otherwise innocuous sign is behind them before Will understands what he’s seen.

“No.” Will’s not sure if he’s whispering or screaming. “No, no. Wait-wait-wait, Hannibal, no, listen-wait-“ He puts his head between his knees and breathes as a crackle of lightning snaps across the interior of the car.

He inhales.

Hannibal smells of nothing. Will breathes and he smells of nothing, nothing, *nothing*. He breathes and gasps *wait* and *please* and *stop* until he’s taking in great lungfuls of air and his head is swimming, and he knows, he *knows* he’s going to pass out, but still Hannibal smells of *nothing*.

Nothing. Of nothing.

Will pats his coat pockets for *The Bountiful Duty*. When they turn up empty, his fingers scramble across the coveralls he put on that morning despite the teetering mass of unopened clothing boxes piled in his closet. Boxes that have been delivered with a Pavlovian consistency over the last few weeks. Boxes that Woodward or Hannibal – no, no, of course it’s Woodward – leave outside of Will’s enclave. One or two or three at a time, piled there like gifts from a vengeful but generous deity to be discovered when Will awakes. When he returns to his bedroom after loitering around the study. After he walks barefoot through Hannibal’s rose garden and must ask the alpha to tend to his wounds. He’ll return to his rooms, his suite, his *Omega Wing*, and there will just *be* another box there.

Will has dutifully taken them into his bedroom and thrown each into the walk-in closet. Unopened. *Unopened*. A shiver of feral delight always strikes him whenever he sees the unopened lot of them in the closet. He’d even reveled in tipping them over once after Woodward stacked them neatly in one corner.

Woodward, Jesus, *Woodward* the damnable, decrepit beast, straining and huffing as he must have been to bend down and move each box-

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I swear to god if we go back-go back home right now, I’ll try on everything. I’ll apologize to Woodward, he’s really not that bad, I’m sorry-” Will gasps and leans further between his knees. His hands skim across the footwell. “Where-where’s the book, I think I forgot it. Wait, Hannibal-please. Just, please, just wait, let me find . . . let me-”

At some immeasurable distance, far from Will and his hammering pulse, Hannibal bypasses a parking lot to stop at the bottom of the wide, stone steps leading to the institute. “Do you require gentling, Will?”

Will sucks a ragged breath into lungs that refuse him. He grips his hair between his hands and pulls until tears join the sweat running down his neck. “Hannibal, please, *please*, I’m sorry. Let’s go home. I want to go home. I-I-I swear, I swear I’ll behave, I will, I just-I just-” From the depths of his chest, a hollow, piercing noise escapes him. “*Please don’t leave me here.*”

“Please tell me if you require gentling.”

“*I don’t know what that is!*” Will inhales with a croak. It’s the bayou, he’s sure. He’s drowning in the hot, swampy waters that have come to claim him in revenge for his father’s escape. The old gods of mud and reptilian placidity are conspiring, have conspired and now he’s drowning. “*Please.*”

“I believe you are experiencing an anxiety attack, Will.”

Oh, but his *name*. The way Hannibal’s accent curls around the letters, making him think wildly of calligraphy and the feel of silk between his fingers, but the air is gone, it’s *gone* and he’s-

“Will, listen to my voice-“ *the air, the air is gone, it’s gone* “-this feels physical but is only psychological, I assure you. Take as deep a breath as you are able, please, on the count of three and then exhale to the count of six.”

Will obeys.

“And again.”

Will obeys. “Are you returning me?”

“Can you sit up?”

“Goddammit, *are you returning me?*”

“No. Sit up, please.”

It’s not a demand, not really, but a suggestion that’s already ripened by Will’s anticipated refusal. It’s with a sort of horror that Will finds himself upright anyway, his spine quivering. He bends to rest his head on the dashboard. Together, he and Hannibal bathe in the wet-rich scent of swampland before Hannibal places his hand gently over the nape of Will’s neck.

“Will, please look at me.”

Will shakes his head against the dashboard, even as he turns his face towards the alpha. His skin ruptures, hot and alive under Hannibal's hand.

"I am not returning you," Hannibal says.

Hannibal's gaze drops to the collar. Will watches the slow, tentative wind of Hannibal's hand as he reaches for it, pupils dilating. The blistering heat at the back of Will's neck spreads down to cross his chest. Hannibal's fingers brush both the collar and Will's red-hot skin. Hannibal runs the pads of his fingers along it and goosebumps riot in their wake.

His eyes on the collar, Hannibal says, "If we were to drive to Wolf Trap right now, would there be evidence you built a fire last night?"

Driven by an impulse he doesn't understand, Will sits upright to clutch at Hannibal's hand. He presses the alpha's fingers around the collar, against his fiery cold skin, until they grip. He grits his teeth against a small, weak noise when Hannibal's nails skim his throat.

Hannibal's eyes are more pupil than iris and growing darker as the alpha slowly flexes his fingers, re-grips, and *pulls*.

He stops, their faces a breath apart.

Will sneers. "No."

Hannibal pulls again, turning Will's head. His breath is hot against Will's ear. "You respond well to commands, my dear."

Will can't help the way he leans into the words. There's a chuckle low in Hannibal's throat that's chased by a guttural purr. Will leans and he leans, until Hannibal's mouth is pressed firmly to his ear. He feels Hannibal's lips part in a smile.

"*Exquisite*," Hannibal breathes. His purr grows deeper as Will continues to lean into it, as a noise somewhere between a mewl and a groan finally breaks between his teeth. When the tip of Hannibal's tongue flicks out to capture his flesh, Will bites down on his own tongue. "Tell me, *mon beau garçon*, why do you present your collar to me?"

Will is breathless and quiet. "Present-I didn't *present* my collar to you, Jesus." He feels a hot flush at his cheeks. "I was trying to placate you. The fire and the house and-"

"You lie, Will, and so poorly."

"*Let go of me.*" Will's shoulder ruptures in a violent twitch and Hannibal is back in his seat, his hands in his lap. The heat of Hannibal's fingers on his skin leaks with an urgency that makes Will think of geysers and teakettles.

You lie, Will, and so poorly.

"I apologize," Hannibal says. "I appear to have misread the situation."

Will doesn't need to look at Hannibal to know he's still smiling. "Yes."

You lie, Will.

“How unusual for me,” Hannibal says.

You lie, Will. And so poorly.

The Man Along the Shore

Chapter Summary

Will needs gentling. Hannibal discovers Will's darkness.

Rated M.

Will paces the third-floor corridor outside Hannibal's bedroom with his skin loose and weightless around his bones.

You lie, Will, and so poorly.

Will grinds his teeth. There's a feeling, some need, an instinct he doesn't have the language to name that's been chewing at his spinal cord since he and Hannibal returned from the institute.

It had been an almost-silent thing at first, easily regulated to a disused corner of his mind. But in the inevitable way of all powerful, discarded creatures, it's gained strength in its isolation. Until now, when it cries out to him, desperate, *begging* for an anchor in a shape and type Will can't find.

He'd ravaged *The Bountiful Duty* for answers with a frenetic energy until, with a low cry, he'd hurled it across his den. He'd then gathered himself under his desk, not daring to bring the blankets with him should his skin dissolve when he finally overheats. He could imagine all too vividly how his flesh would peel from the muscle underneath as he fought his way to the surface. Like some mercreature, horrible in its reptilian coil. Sharp claws and sharp teeth unable to pierce the intricately woven strands of human-made nylon. Unable to escape.

There's something wrong with me, he'd texted Matthew. *I feel like my skin is falling off.*

Outside Hannibal's darkened bedroom, Will grips his forearm, his chest, the back of his neck.

Heat?

No. This is new. I'm melting.

Call doc Bloom.

Will had snarled in his den and had only just managed to refrain from hurling his phone across it, too.

His instincts are traitorously silent.

He paces outside the doors to Hannibal's bedroom and lets his fury overtake him.

French doors! His voice is loud and screeching in his head. *French doors covered in drapes of all ridiculous fucking things.*

He paces and rubs his sweaty palms across the only item of clothing he seems capable of wearing in this godforsaken house - Hannibal's silk fucking pajama pants. He rubs and stops pacing. He rubs and continues to rub and almost groans as the anchor begins to take shape.

"Will."

Will flies through several horrifying acts. He flinches, jumps, and cries out, but he can't, he *cannot* stop rubbing his palms against his thighs.

He glares at Hannibal. "What's the fucking point of *French doors* if you're just going to put curtains over them?"

Half-emerged from his bedroom, one hand still cupped against the open door, Hannibal's eyes sweep over him. Will feels exposed, naked, like he's been caught scratching an unseemly itch. Even then, he can't stop.

"Oh, Will," Hannibal says, his expression relaxing into something soft, sweet, *tender*. It's with tenderness, too, that he reaches a hand towards Will.

"What's gentling?" Will bites out through teeth that ache in his mouth. He flings his arms across his chest, unable to stop his fingers from touching whatever stretch of skin they reach. "I mean, I've heard it before, obviously. Seen it on TV or in movies or whatever. The omegas at the institute used to do it to each other, I guess, but it always looked like a whole bunch of preteens giving each other back rubs at a slumber party." His upper lip curls to expose his teeth when Hannibal's expression softens further. "But you said it in the car so clinically, like it's an actual thing. What is it?" Will clutches harder at his chest and whines at the ground, the wall, anywhere but Hannibal's sweet, soft expression. "*My skin.*"

Softly, with the scents of kindness billowing from him, Hannibal says, "May I gentle you, Will?"

With a violence he feels but doesn't mean, Will launches himself at Hannibal. The alpha catches him neatly, pressing the length of their bodies together. Words clamber sharply in Will's mind – *strength, comfort, warmth, safety*.

He must have given away his intentions, must have given some warning in the freeze of muscle or tilt of his stance, for Hannibal just manages to tip his head to the side as Will's teeth clack together over the spot Hannibal's jugular had been.

A noise Will didn't know he could make, something caught between a snarl, a mewl, and a groan, rises from him to spill into the third-floor corridor.

You lie, Will, and so poorly.

Will burrows his head between Hannibal's arms and the alpha constricts further, giving him the shelter, the tether, the *anchor* his loose, dissolving skin needs to right itself.

In a language Will doesn't know but understands through the roil of scents that bloom around him, Hannibal whispers, *"Oh, my precious thing, my poor thing, my light. How do you not know of this? Who has deprived you of their touch? Sweet boy, blessed boy, my love, how could anyone deny you? Be calm, be still, I have you. You are safe. You are mine. I swear, I swear to you I will burn to ash whoever, whatever has willingly denied you this."*

In the black depths of Hannibal's chest, between Hannibal's arms, Will gives a shaky laugh. "Not if I burn them first."

You lie.

Hannibal pulls him closer. Will's breath catches in his throat.

"To the study, Will."

Will nods.

He inhales the Hannibal's scent. It's no longer peppers and fire but leather, wood, forged steel, and freshly cut grass.

* * * * *

Somewhere between the second and first floor, Hannibal feels Will begin to unravel.

Will clutches at Hannibal's back for a long moment on the second-floor landing, making pitiful little noises even as he digs sharp fingers into Hannibal's spine. "There's something wrong with me. My skin is falling off."

"Mano liūdnas dalykas," Hannibal says. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. This is only touch deprivation and easily fixed."

Hannibal doesn't know whether it's his native tongue or the tenderness leaking from his mouth and fingertips. Or even if it's this fresh reminder that Will is irrevocably, *beautifully* omegan as he trembles between Hannibal's arms. Whatever the cause, Hannibal has only a moment to prepare himself as Will stills before the omega rears back and slams his forehead into Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal releases a small *oof* of surprised breath. He lifts his hands as Will rears back again, catching the omega's face between his palms and stepping aside to bring both of his arms across and down Will's shoulders. With a force that knocks the breath from them both, Hannibal snakes his arms through and up until he has the omega pinned. His fingers weave through the soft, curly strands at the nape of Will's neck.

Will submits at once.

"Will you attack me if I let you go?"

Choking, sputtering. A soft moan. "No."

The omega is already smiling when Hannibal releases him. It's a half-deprecating, rueful thing that pulls at the corners of Hannibal's own mouth. Will shuffles his feet, winces, and, with his head bowed, slowly breaches the space between them.

Nestled back between Hannibal's arms, Will rubs his cheek against Hannibal's shirt before pressing his ear to Hannibal's chest where a low, greedy purr has already commandeered Hannibal's vocal cords. Hannibal pulls Will gently towards the bottom of the staircase.

He continues to pull, to direct them towards the study once they reach the ground floor, but Will locks his joints in the hallway. He shimmies his shoulders against the weight of Hannibal's arms and moves his head until he finds the pulse of Hannibal's vibrating larynx.

Hannibal tips his head to the ceiling, exhaling a slow, uneven breath just as he hears the response of Will's higher, softer purr.

Once in the study, Hannibal says, "Sit on the rug before the sofa, please. I'm going to build a fire."

Will moves to the bar instead, scowling. With a sigh, Hannibal kneels before the fireplace and places a few logs within. He grabs the box of long-stemmed matches from the mantel and crouches again to light it. "I take it you're feeling better? Skin no longer in immediate threat of abandoning you?"

"Yeah," Will mumbles, plucking a tumbler from one of the bar's lower shelves. "And, for the record, 'touch deprivation' is a phrase I didn't need to experience to understand. Unlike the long-winded, nonsensical explanation in *The Bountiful Duty*." In a nasally voice, with his back to Hannibal, he recites, "*Sometimes, dear omega, your king and/or queen might forget that we all need love. A nice pat on the back is a great form of love and one you should ask for! A shoulder rub is a great form of love, too. No matter where you are or who you're with, you should always ask yours truly for physical affection when you want it. And make sure to tell someone you trust if your alpha refuses.*"

"Woeful," Hannibal says. "Though I'm afraid this feeling won't last the night. You need to be gentled properly."

"I feel fine."

"For now."

Crouched before the fireplace, one hand feeding a log to it, Hannibal inhales deeply. Will has been pre-heat for days now, the scents of sticky amber and camphor having grown steadily as they pass.

Hannibal's inhale must have drawn Will's attention to him, because the sharp, tangy scent of fear blossoms in the room. "What's wrong? Am I okay?"

"There's absolutely nothing wrong. I only feared for a moment you'd gone into heat."

"Oh," Will says, "no. I'm still a few days out."

“Even you cannot know with such precision.”

“Oh, please. I can scent six different types of fear from a beta, and you don’t think I can nail my own? Don’t insult me. 55 to 60 hours at least.”

At the bar, Will has already tipped each bottle back to read its contents. He tips them again. When he stubbornly begins the circuit a third time, Hannibal collects a patient file and his voice recorder from his desk and brings both to the leather sofa.

He keeps half an eye on Will as he opens the file. “It would be prudent to decide now how you’d like to spend your heat. I’m afraid we’re too close in time for suppressants to be effective, but I can certainly find accommodations for you at a omegan hotel. Or some other arrangement, if you’d prefer. A surrogate, perhaps-”

Will makes a noise in the back of his throat. “A *prostitute*? Seriously?”

“It’s a perfectly legitimate-“

“Jesus Christ,” Will says and, to Hannibal’s disquiet, the omega arches his back in a slow, undulating roll. “Shut up.”

“I’m going to ask you only once more, and I insist you consider the question with the gravity it’s owed. Are you absolutely certain you are not on the cusp of heat?”

Will opens his eyes only to narrow them. “Yes.”

Alcohol of choice firmly in hand, Will browses the bookshelves. He does so with something closer to grace than is typical for the omega. He swirls his drink, rolling his shoulders every few steps as though ensuring his skin is still set with purpose across his bones.

Hannibal says, “You are absolutely stunning, you know.”

Will freezes, his glass lifted halfway to his mouth. He stands still for a moment, painted as a lean foreground against shiny marble and flickering light. Hannibal watches a flash cross Will’s face and knows Will has assessed his words and made a decision.

A grimacing smile tightens the curve of his mouth. “Oh?”

“Quite.”

Will brings the glass to his mouth and swallows a handful of quick sips, inhaling as he finishes the drink. “Okay,” he says, turning to face Hannibal. “We may as well do this now, right?” He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth and flinches before meandering, disjointed, back to the bar. “Well. Maybe another drink.”

“There’s no need to oblivate yourself into relations with me. You’ve been my guest for months now. You already know I didn’t bring you here to mate with you. That does not, however, stop me from simple observations. If you’d prefer, I can keep them to myself.”

Will snorts. He empties a bottle of scotch into his glass. "Right, because you give a single fuckall for my preferences. My willingness." He pauses and laughs at Hannibal's frown. "Oh, but let's be honest. This is my punishment for leaving last night, isn't it? Or for refusing you now? Or is this the reward you expect for carrying me down the stairs? This morning wasn't enough torture for you?"

"I don't extract punishment or reward of any kind and especially not from flesh." Hannibal touches his chest where the ache of a deep bruise is already building. "Even if you do."

"Jesus," Will barks with an eyeroll made dramatic by scotch. Still, he grimaces as his eyes flick to Hannibal's chest. "I'm sorry about the headbutt, okay? I am. But not nearly as sorry as you should be for that stunt you pulled this morning."

"Stunt."

"Yes, Hannibal, *stunt*." Will's voice climbs. "The one where you pretended all fucking morning that you were upset with me, driving me to the institute with no fucking explanation until I had a goddamn *panic attack* only for what – so you could enjoy a hardon as I begged you—" He stops, holding up his hand as though Hannibal has interrupted him. "Don't willingly be an idiot when you can empathize instead, okay?"

"Is that a personal motto or one you've simply adopted for me?"

"It's a motto I've found to be especially helpful with alphas."

"I may deserve that."

Will slams the empty bottle on the bar but doesn't let it go. "I may deserve that. Seriously, fuck off with the martyrdom or whatever it is you're doing right now. You were an asshole earlier and so just-just . . . just own it or knock it off." Will tips his head back and swallows the contents of his glass, gasping as the astringency steals his breath.

Hannibal picks up the voice recorder and resumes working. Jack's and Alana's joint frowns are present like flickering lights at the edges of his vision. "The purpose of this morning was to ensure you were well aware of what I already know, my dear - you prefer to be here, in my company, than back at the institute." He turns a page of the file. "Mission achieved."

He expects an immediate, verbally savage response from Will and, upon reflection, is only half-surprised by the violent weight of the omega on his chest.

"You fucking *asshole*," Will spits, knocking the patient file and voice recorder to the ground. He clambers across Hannibal, clawing and nipping and biting at Hannibal's exposed throat. "Who in the everliving, undying *fuck* do you think you are?"

Will strikes a single, stunning blow with the heel of his palm against Hannibal's breastbone that knocks the breath from him. Will growls low in his throat and Hannibal feels the angry vibration course through his own chest to rest hungry and heady in his skull.

“Don’t pretend for a motherfucking second your instincts aren’t driving you to put me in my place. You just have the disgusting leisure of being an alpha, you coward, so *fight me*.”

With that, Hannibal takes Will’s clawing, ravaging hands in his and flips them both to the ground, landing heavily on Will.

“You?” Hannibal asks. The beginnings of his own growl rumble in his chest. “You, who have spent months waiting for me to show you the monster you believe all alphas are? You, who provokes so incessantly, begging me to strike back. You, Will, you dare call *me* a coward?”

Hannibal bares his teeth and sinks them unforgivingly into Will’s shoulder. The bite is too far from Will’s jugular to bond but close enough to make the omega flinch. Will bucks, snarling and snapping at Hannibal’s neck which is poised just out of reach of the omega’s teeth.

Hannibal laps at the mark on Will’s shoulder, his tongue neatly filling the small grooves.

“Yes,” Will cries, arching with a low moan that cleaves through Hannibal’s chest. The pendulum swings and suddenly Will is writhing, his teeth clacking, both thrusting his hips against Hannibal and spitting curses into his ear. “*I’ll fucking kill you.*”

“I won’t have you if you threaten me,” Hannibal says mildly, blazing in the glow of Will’s fury. “I’m quite serious. You either calm yourself or I will send you to bed.”

Somehow, Will slinks one hand free and grips Hannibal’s hair, pulling him down until their foreheads rock together. The omega’s eyes are wet and heavy.

In a voice that is low and vengeful, Will says, “I hate you, Hannibal Lecter.”

“My sweet boy, you do not know the meaning of the word.”

Will throws Hannibal’s head back with violence. “Fight me, then! Fight me, for fuck’s sake, put your omega in his place, what is wrong with you? *Coward!*”

There is something alive and unholy in Hannibal’s chest. “*My omega?*”

Will must have found himself speechless because although he makes a handful of abortive attempts to continue his tirade, he ultimately, slowly concentrates his efforts on grinding himself against Hannibal.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” Will gasps as Hannibal plunges one hand into the omega’s waistband to grip his cock. “Never. Never. I’ll never forgive you.”

“Why, my sweet thing? Am I not providing exactly what you want?” Hannibal runs his palm over the precum gathered at the head of Will’s cock and slowly, slowly slides his hand down the hot length of him. “Or are you speaking to yourself?” He slides his hand upward, twisting his wrist near the leaking tip and consuming the omega’s whispered groan. “Imagine it, Will, the utter, tragic beauty of this moment. You, having spent months prodding and poking and inciting me to violence. Could you indeed find forgiveness for having given yourself to me, nay for throwing yourself at me, after failing so magnificently? It’s *breathtaking*.”

Hannibal slides his hand down again, reveling in the silky, tacky flesh beneath his fingers and the way Will opens his mouth wide only to release a small whimper. This time, Hannibal groans with him.

Hannibal's next words are said through clenched teeth. "What will you do with yourself, then? What *can* you do? How restlessly would you bide your time? Would you wait until the pleasant glow of your orgasm fades? Until I'm asleep and vulnerable? What revenge will you extract for giving yourself to me so willingly, opening yourself to me so magnificently?" Hannibal smiles and presses his mouth to the delicate curve of Will's neck. "Whatever you do, know that you will find forgiveness for yourself and me both. It's a promise I'm willing to bet my life on."

Will growls, furious, and digs his fingers between the buttons of Hannibal's shirt, pulling until all Hannibal can hear is the clattering of buttons and all he can feel is the naked expanse of his skin against Will's. Will pulls him in for a kiss. Hannibal resists, allowing their lips to come together in no more than a flash of pressure, thrilled when Will wraps his legs around his waist to draw him in further.

At first, Hannibal feels only the awkward alignment of his smile against Will's pliant mouth. But at Will's howled moan of frustration, he dives ruthlessly into the kiss.

"*Jesus,*" Will breathes, breaking the kiss to press his mouth to one of Hannibal's nipples, his teeth to Hannibal's chest, until Hannibal, only half-conscious with him, brings their mouths back together. Will moans, unabashed in his arousal, and into Hannibal's mouth says, "*Please.*"

Hannibal looks down, ignoring the omega's angry snarl as their lips part, to see where the delicate coil of his fingers is folded around Will's cock, so heavy and full in his hand. And suddenly, Hannibal is drowning in scent. All at once, he's consumed by it. That half-sweet, half-tangy nothing and everything scent of *desire*. He is suffocating, folding into it, until only the weak flare of ancestral instinct directs him. And they demand. They *demand*. They demand, they demand, demand he *take the omega, take him, take him, take him, take him*.

A shivering remnant of Hannibal's subconscious knows that at some point in the future he'll reflect on this moment with shame. But now, encapsulated by the scent of slick and the desperate fury of Will's moans, instinct is all.

Hannibal must have made a noise. He must have said something aloud. Because one moment he's propelled by nothing more than base desire and the next he's aware Will is beginning to still underneath him.

"Hannibal?" Will asks with a quiet strain and an annoyed growl that both parts the omega's lips and altogether fails to stop the press and retreat of his hips into Hannibal's hand.

As quickly as Hannibal had been sucked under the roil of the omega's scent, he's released. "Have I hurt you?" he breathes into the top of Will's head.

"N-No," Will says, surprised, amused, and then closes his eyes. He stretches against where his wrists are still pinned by Hannibal's forearm and *by God* the arch of Will's back, the part

of his lips, the delicate furrow between his brows and impossibly the noise. That noise that starts deep in Will's chest and escapes from him like a curse trapped for a decade in unlighted space, the sheer force of it tips Hannibal over. The noise sends him churning air over an unmarked precipice and he is falling, falling, falling into something deep and unsustainable.

"Oh, *god*," Will says, turning his head towards the fireplace, exposing the soft curve of neck and the rabbiting pulse under his ear. He opens his eyes and Hannibal watches his gaze lock on the flesh of Hannibal's bicep resting on the rug next to him. Will examines it for a long moment before he hisses and clamps teeth to skin.

It is not an imitation of Hannibal's frantic first bite, lividly red but already fading from Will's shoulder. It's the ravaging bite of a predator intending to inflict irreparable damage; a bite that draws immediate blood. A bite that takes every ounce of willpower Hannibal has not to pull away from, knowing he'll only succeed in ripping flesh from limb.

And just like that, he releases Will's cock to wrap his fingers around the omega's throat.

His instincts are silent but attentive.

Will's head and torso freeze although his hips continue to rise and fall in a ludicrous quest for friction. Hannibal leans into his grip until he feels the line of Will's trachea and the flutter of his jugular.

He presses his mouth to the omega's ear. "There will be none of that."

Hannibal has been starved and now he is falling. He is drowning and being consumed and he can see it, taste it as it happens. He feels the weight of his own erection, constrained by fabric but nevertheless pressing, rubbing up and down, up and down Will's bent knee as Will moves his leg with him.

Will snarls, tightening his jaws on Hannibal's bicep. Hannibal sucks in a hissed breath and pushes into his hold on Will's throat. "Listen to me very carefully," he says and is only somewhat surprised to hear the rich, echoing double-timbre of his *other* voice. That commanding vibration that makes betas roll their eyes and which he has not yet had the opportunity to present to an omega with any real intent. The tone he secretly refers to as his *alpha voice*. "Let go."

It's with the hard, rolling press of his cock against Will's leg that Will responds so immediately to it. The omega's jaw slackens. He pulls away from Hannibal's bicep to consider the punctures left behind. He presses first his lips and then the flat of his tongue to the skin, his eyes docile and searching Hannibal's face.

Hannibal loosens his grip from Will's throat. Will takes a deep breath around the outward thrust of his tongue but otherwise makes no move to stop.

Hannibal presses his mouth back to the pink shell of Will's ear. "If you draw blood from me again tonight, it will be I who kills you."

A flurry of delight burns acreage in Hannibal's chest as Will responds to his words with a furious, hot moan and resumed thrusting. With it, Hannibal feels the tingling pressure at the base of his cock as his knot begins to grow.

When Hannibal lowers his head to Will's, regrips his cock, and hears the omega's gasp of relief as their lips touch, he can't help himself - can't help the name spilling from him with a forbidden frequency, like coins placed one after the other into a slot machine. It's said too far apart to be dismissed by the semiconscious raptures of sex, yet too close together to be anything other than the worshipful chant it is.

"Will," Hannibal groans into the frantic, tearing lick of the omega's mouth. His knot is tight and aching. "Will. Will. *Will*."

"Oh fuck," Will breathes back, filling Hannibal's lungs and ears and nose with a shivering warmth that claws like an ache at his gut. "Oh Hannibal, oh god, oh Jesus."

Hannibal adjusts his hand, cupping Will's balls between his fingers. A violent shudder rips through him as he feels the wetness pooled underneath. He both is and is not surprised when Will angles his hips to his searching fingers, presenting his opening and mewling in anticipation.

"Please," Will says. "Jesus, *please*."

Hannibal couldn't have denied Will anything in that moment.

Had the omega asked, he would have slit his wrists and let Will drink from him until he was withered, succumbed, and smiling.

He'd have confessed to murder with a lightness borne by nothing but this sweet creature's desire for it.

He'd have raped and pillaged, conquered and slain, let himself be beleaguered until Will was satisfied, his appetites slaked.

And then, still, Hannibal would have waited, waited, waited until the first touch of Will's hunger rose again.

He presses one finger to Will's opening and feels his own groin tighten. He finds himself wishing he could die in that moment, live forever tucked within it, if only so he never has to be without it.

"Please," Will whispers, "*please*."

Hannibal rubs his finger against Will and slowly, *slowly* applies pressure, half-crazed with need, until the pad of his finger dips inside, wet and hot and *tight*. Without his permission, he's flooded with filthy, degrading images of how his knot will look – furiously hard and red – pressed against the heat of Will's opening. The small *pop*, the overwhelming serenity of pushing through the ring of hardened muscles to fit deeply, *perfectly* within the omega's heat.

“Oh no, oh god, oh god.” Will’s fingernails dig into Hannibal’s forearm and Hannibal grits his teeth in shocked pleasure when the small white lines of Will’s bitten nails fill with blood. “Hannibal, Hannibal, I’m going – Hannibal, I’m–“

“Yes,” Hannibal whispers into Will’s ear, darting his tongue to lick one of the soft crescents. He nuzzles under Will’s jaw, rubbing his stubble against soft skin and inhaling the omega’s scent, amber and honey and burned charcoal and sticky with the dying sweetness of autumn. He presses teeth pulsing with frenzy and shivers at the frenzy beat that taps back against his lips.

“Hannibal, I’m going-Hannibal, *please*,” Will whimpers. “I’m going to come-I, Jesus-”

He releases Will’s wrists and they snap to Hannibal’s back, clawing and digging and Hannibal knows Will is drawing further blood. He knows the omega is purposeful in this, tempting Hannibal to slaughter.

With a low chuckle and a roll of his own hips against Will’s leg, Hannibal bends a knuckle of his finger.

In that rich, double-timbred echo, Hannibal breathes into the spice and sweat and salted air between them. “Come for me, Will.”

With a gasp and an arch that lifts the omega’s torso from the ground, Will’s orgasm touches every inch of Hannibal’s exposed skin. He feels the pulsing thrum of Will’s cock in his hand, the lines of his release as they collect between their flesh, and watches Will, his head thrown back and his brows pushed together, gasping a silent scream with a mouth thrown open wide.

Hannibal thrusts once, twice, three times against Will’s leg and with a deep groan, looses himself into his pants.

He collapses on top of Will and Will collapses underneath him, relaxing onto the rug. They rest, enclosed. Will’s arms are around Hannibal’s back, his fingers wet and sticky with drying blood.

After a few minutes, when the frantic thumping of Will’s heart begins to slow, the omega bends his fingers tentatively against Hannibal’s back. They both feel the tightness of dried blood there.

In a whisper, Will asks, “Are you going to kill me?”

Hannibal laughs. It’s an unusual sound and one he’s not sure Will has heard. He runs his mouth up Will’s shoulder, dragging his bottom lip across salted skin. Pressing and biting at Will’s neck, he whispers back, “Not tonight at least.”

* * * * *

In the morning, it’s snowing in Hannibal’s study.

Hannibal feels along the edges of the rug beneath him. When his fingers fail to find anything to throw over himself, he gives up in favor of the snow.

It's light and airy and just as it dampens sound outdoors, his study is now dappled in nothing more than the quiet golden ombre of the rising sun.

When he looks at Will, the omega is already staring at him.

Will's eyes scan the falling snow. He's laying on his stomach, his head cradled in his arms. The iris that peeks through heavy lashes is as light a color as Hannibal has ever seen it. An island of calm around which the sea rages.

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

Will rolls over with a little wince until he's on his back. He tips his head back and extends an arm, fingers curling around the falling snow. There's still dried blood under his fingernails. "This one always confused me." His gaze flickers to Hannibal, rolls away. "It's happiness, or contentment, or something similar. But the memory tied to it isn't a happy one."

"And what memory is that?"

"Right before my first heat, back at my house in Wolf Trap--"

There are dead lights, far away. They have been out for a millennium or more.

"-I was staring out the window, kind of knew, kind of didn't know what was happening--"

But closer to shore, where waves breach land turned black with neglect, a man stands alone.

"-and it started to snow. It made me cry--"

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

"-It was beautiful."

But for now, while he can, the man raises his hand to turn the lights back on.

Hannibal stands beside Will on the blackened shore.

The omega's outline ripples with the approaching tide. Hannibal finds, to his dismay, that he's brought nothing with him; has not come prepared in his own wanderings across the precipitous peaks that surround the inlet where Will stands. He has no boat nor raft nor life preserver.

The thought makes him weak.

Will is still smiling a painful smile and Hannibal thinks his utter lack may be fine in the end. Will wouldn't accept his help, anyway. The omega would laugh cruelly and sneer if Hannibal came burdened with gifts. He'd roll his eyes, perhaps, or insult Hannibal's naivety in attempting to save Will from himself.

Will can't be saved. Not while the sea still beckons.

Though he's not touching the omega, Hannibal sees the little lights spread across the water as clearly as if Will was showing him a memory. Perhaps it's a result of their intimacy the evening before or a function of Will's current emotional climate.

Happiness, or contentment, or something similar.

Warmth spreads through Hannibal's veins. The lights stand pure and brilliant against an endlessly moonless night. Five little lights-

Hannibal's mind stutters to a halt and then picks up with bracing speed. The warmth in his blood is chased by sickly, deadly ice as his brain trips over itself under the deluge of memories.

Alana, her voice sweet with worry as she hesitates outside the conference room at the institute. "He's waiting for Mason Verger to make a move."

The back cover of Will's book where four – only four - names and addresses are blotted beyond all recognition.

Jack handing over the file for the Falls Road Arsonist, his tone purposefully clinical as he denounces Will's violent nature and rejects the thought that Will might be dangerous despite the fact he and Hannibal both knew better.

Will, scathing and unapologetic and ruthlessly disinterested as he concludes the Falls Road Arsonist and the Panty Bandit are not the same person but offers no other insights.

The hurricane, real and alive and decimating Hannibal's study. The ash of Will's fury that may, just may have erupted into an actual inferno had the omega's anger gotten the better of him. And then, Will returning to the manor smelling of smoke and destruction and admitting he had not, in fact, gone back to Wolf Trap to build a fire.

In the study, Will closes his eyes. His face is awash in cool, glittering snow. His smile softens and he is *beautiful*.

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

In front of inky water, Hannibal lifts his hand, a dark outline against a darker sea, to place it on Will's shoulder. The flickering edges of Will's body shudder once and then still until his outline as sharp and devastating as the incoming tide.

If Will refuses to be saved, if Hannibal cannot let him drown, then Hannibal will do what he can to anchor Will to his purpose.

In the study, he reaches out to Will with a steady hand. The omega turns to him. His irises are more gold than blue.

The pieces slot together.

"You're the Falls Road Arsonist," Hannibal says. "And Jack knows."

Until the Tide

Chapter Summary

Jack calls Hannibal. Will is pushed over the edge.

As though summoned by the weight of Hannibal's knowledge alone, Jack telephones later that day.

You're the Fall Road Arsonist. And Jack knows.

Will stands on the other side of Hannibal's office door, his face pressed to its beveled edges. His fingers skip over the oak paneling, and he lets his nails catch on each edge as they fall. It's an uncomfortable and heavy feeling as his nails bend slightly the wrong way, so that he must grit his teeth before each inevitable plummet, only to catch them once more on the beveled edge below.

There are a half-dozen or so such edges and he runs each finger against them once, twice, three times, until his jaw aches and his fingers ache and he wonders whether he might be doing more harm than good for the sun shining through the window at his back refuses to die even as he wilts.

"Sure, Jack. I'll bring him by now."

When Will hears Hannibal's footfalls from the other side of the door, he's overwhelmed by the urge to run. He should run; run and tuck himself in an abandoned crevice of the manor and content himself to die there. Or wait until Hannibal finds and kills him.

Instead, he turns to stone. And he stays that way even after Hannibal asks him to get dressed, one of his hands soft and supportive on Will's lower back as he turns Will towards the stairs.

When they pull up to the crime scene, Hannibal presents him with a collar and Will gropes at it blindly, fumbling with the latch. Hannibal watches his efforts with a neutral expression, his maroon irises closer to terra cotta than pitch, before taking it back from him.

The alpha's fingers are tentative on Will's neck as he buckles the collar into place. They linger, tracing the bruises left from the night before. Will can feel them but has not yet had the opportunity to see. They must be stunning, though. Beautiful, brazen. Small and refined. They burn under Hannibal's touch.

Will makes a noise when Hannibal presses his lips lightly to the tattoo behind his ear.

"You are immaculate, Will."

The words should have stirred something soft and sweet in Will. Instead, he's lost to the knowledge that he'd let Hannibal *see* him this morning. He's also lost to the careful, detached way Hannibal had circled him in the manor a few hours before Jack called, the same way one alpha circles another when there's only a single omega on offer between them.

Hannibal had circled like *Will* was the threat.

They both stare out across the windshield into the dull, gray afternoon, made duller by dark clouds that hang far too close to the ground. Onlookers and reporters mill. Agents in dark blue jackets with "FBI" in foot-high letters across their backs meander in and out of frame. Jack Crawford stands on legs shoulder width apart, his hands clasped behind his back, his torso squared at Hannibal's car.

Together, Will and Hannibal survey the burned husk of a building.

"Randall Tier, I presume?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods. Hannibal hums. The scents of *serenity* (chamomile tea, a wood stove, freshly laundered clothing) are vague but present in the enclosed car.

Will wonders if he's been led to slaughter.

"This is where you went the other night," Hannibal says. "When you came back smelling like smoke and fire. This is what you did." He pauses. "This Randall Tier, is he one of your dead lights?"

Will could have wept. Instead, he only nods.

"I've read the file," Hannibal says as they both stare at Jack Crawford. "There was no accelerant. No burn patterns. No identified origin. It was as though a thousand fires began at once. The buildings were simply . . . lit."

But for now, while he can, the man raises his hand to turn the lights back on.

Will raises his hand to Hannibal, who takes it. Not gently, not with caution or some other deference to the monster Will has revealed. But easily, like any intimate act exchanged between them a hundred times or more.

Hannibal's hand tightens around Will's and suddenly the absolute *absurdity* of it all hits Will like a gut punch.

He's sitting here, *right here*, outside the crumbling ruins of a house he'd destroyed with his own two omegan hands, the ruins of a man possibly still within. He, a former FBI consultant, next to another former FBI consultant who's rubbing sweet little circles against the back of Will's knuckles as though Jack-fucking-Crawford isn't attempting to set Hannibal's car on fire with the force of his gaze.

It's insane. It's absurd. It's exactly the last place he wants to be, ever thought he would be. He gives a screech of a laugh that makes him wince and makes Hannibal turn his head to look at him.

“I wasn’t careful,” Will says, his stomach heaving with a giggle. Tears blur his vision. “My hair. My fingerprints. Oh Christ, this is too much.”

He’s shown Hannibal the broken, stuttering cogs of his inner workings. He’s let Hannibal see him. He’s finally, *finally* relinquished control of himself as easily as he’d relinquished control of his body under the damnable man’s hands.

And now he’s sitting outside of his own crime scene because despite having actual knowledge of everything he could have done to save himself, he hadn’t bothered.

Because he’s weak.

Because he’s omegan.

Because he’s tired.

Because only one name and address now remain unobscured by his spit pressed with a finger crusted in ash against the back cover of his book. Because his time on this nebulous plane of existence where he was born an omega and can no longer abide it is drawing quickly to a close.

In the interior of Hannibal’s car, Will smells *confusion, horror, surprise*, and layered across them all like too-sweet frosting, *complete and utter dedication*.

Hannibal says, “You wanted to be caught?”

“No. But it wouldn’t have mattered, anyway.”

Horror and dedication peak in unison. “You don’t intend to survive the aftermath.”

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

“No,” Will says.

He’s frozen, staring out the front window of Hannibal’s car, afraid to blink. Afraid that the horror that’s already eating at his bones at the knowledge that he failed to burn one of the white pillars to either side of Randall’s front door will dissolve and restructure in the precise shape of Randall’s basement. Where Will sat with a bottle of water and a bucket, covered in his own slick.

The pillar looms large against Jack’s back. It *mocks* him.

He can’t meet Hannibal’s eye.

It’s only because he’s already refusing to look at Hannibal that Will sees the graying, stumpy man appear from around one side of the pillar before Hannibal does. On instinct, he hisses. Hannibal follows his line of sight, first to Jack and, further down the crumbling mass of Randall’s house, to Abel Gideon.

“Stay here,” Hannibal says.

* * * * *

Both Jack and Abel stare as Hannibal approaches. Jack is calculating and inscrutable. Abel's grin is all teeth.

It's Jack who says, "You forgot something, Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal feels a sudden urge to smile. "Will has agreed to assist you. But I am withholding my consent until Dr. Gideon is escorted from the premises."

"Dr. Gid-" Jack starts. His voice is already rising. "He was personally recommended by Frederick Chilton *for* Will." He takes a step forward, lowering his voice. "You know as well as I do Will needs some . . . support with these things. And you're not exactly in a position to offer objective advice, are you?"

Abel's jaw is tight. The jovial expression he'd wore at Hannibal's arrival has collapsed. Beside him, Jack anger is tightly controlled, though he's staring intently at Hannibal.

"Will has already told you he has no further insights," Hannibal says. "I consented to bring him as a professional courtesy and an acknowledgment of our working relationship, Jack. A consent that will remain withdrawn until I am satisfied Will's mental health will remain undamaged." Hannibal eyes him. "You have my condition."

Jack brings his hands to chest level, palms open and towards the ground. *Placating, calming.* "All right, Dr. Lecter," he says slowly, "all right. Loud and clear."

Jack looks over his shoulder towards Abel who has schooled his expression into a neutrality that tips slightly towards concern. His eyes flash as they meet Hannibal's.

Jack says, "I appreciate your willingness to come out here today, Dr. Gideon. But we won't be needing your services after all. Talk to Brian Zeller. He'll drive you back to Quantico." He turns to Hannibal and spreads his hands out to either side of himself. *See? I can be reasonable.*

As Hannibal walks back to his car, he feels Abel's stare like a razor burn at the back of his neck. As he seats himself behind the steering wheel, he eyes Jack, mollified to see the other alpha is not looking towards the Bentley but at Gideon with narrowed, practiced eyes.

"Can we go?" Will asks.

"No. Jack agreed to send Dr. Gideon away. We're waiting until he does."

Will shifts in his seat. He rips off a piece of thumbnail and spits it towards the dashboard. "Why are we even here? I don't want to profile anyone and definitely not-" he stops, rips off a second piece of nail, and spits. "Why are you doing this?"

Hannibal leans back into his seat, his eyes fixed firmly on Abel as he climbs into one of the FBI's black SUVs. "Not unlike the files themselves, I believe Jack is attempting to set a trap. You handled the files with aplomb, thereby forcing him to switch tack. If he had anything

resembling surety you committed these crimes, you'd already be in custody. We may have a rare opportunity here to point Jack in a different direction."

Will grunts. "*Panty Bandit*," he says after a few moments.

Hannibal smiles. He takes the Will's hand from his mouth and kisses his knuckles. "Another poke at the bear, my darling, nothing more."

Together, they watch Zeller's hand emerge from the driver's side window of the SUV to wave at the meandering agents. No one waves back. The vehicle starts with a flash of headlights that turn towards Hannibal's windshield, across it, and then away as Zeller drives it down Randall Tier's circular driveway and out onto the abutting street.

Will exhales heavily through his mouth.

Hannibal brings Will's hand back to his lips in the fey of a kiss. With knuckles pressed to his mouth, he says, "Are you ready to disappoint Jack immensely, my love?"

* * * * *

Will buttons his jacket up to his chin once he and Hannibal leave the car. They duck under the police tape and make their way up the cement walkway. *Slow and steady*. Hannibal's hand rests lightly, possessively on Will's lower back. Despite his darkening mood, Will is surprised to find the touch brings him a little comfort.

When he finally gathers the courage to look at Jack, he thinks he might collapse with relief. Despite the tension around the alpha's eyes, he's giving Will the same look he always gives him at crime scenes.

Will doesn't mind. It's an expression he's seen far too many times to be sensitive to it now. A dozen memories of *wariness* and *fear* and knowing looks shared between colleagues. A hundred different ways he's seen *Will Graham is unstable* in every manner of expression and gesture.

Beside Jack is an agent Will doesn't know. Will nods absently at him before turning to survey the agents huddled nearby. Tempered by a collar, even hidden as it is under his jacket, he no longer needs to obey the rules of social decorum. Hannibal can speak for him.

Hannibal cocks his head. Will inhales deeply, though he keeps his gaze circling the crowd across the field. Despite himself, he can't stop the tilt of his own head towards Hannibal or the way his eyes travel towards the knees of the men before him so he can focus on the scents Hannibal is leaking into the space between them.

He breathes. Metal and foreign spices. *Curiosity*.

He breathes. Copper, ice, the chill of frozen mercy. *Concern*.

He breathes. Damp must, sweat, tangy and overripe. *Alarm*.

He breathes. Fire, the capsaicin burn of peppers and dry ice, and a mounting inferno. *Fury*.

Will refocuses on the man beside Jack. He's an alpha, lean and erect, on the younger side of middle-aged. His eyes are more black than red around dilated pupils. Will breathes deeply.

He smells of nothing.

Humid rain suddenly threatens to fall from the winter sky. Sweat prickles at the nape of Will's neck.

The alpha beside Jack gives them his name, though Will doesn't hear it over the sudden cry of a bird in the distance. "Agent-in-Charge Crawford has asked me to assist with this case. It's been giving Quantico quite a run for their money."

"He's from the Indianapolis office," Jack manages despite the tension at his cheek and jaw. "Doctor Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham. Kade Prurnell believes a fresh set of eyes on the case might help us catch the guy."

Will doesn't know what to do with the distant rumble of thunder, but Hannibal steps forward to shake the agent's hand. The agent doesn't take his eyes from Will.

"This is the Tier residence," Jack says. "Burned to the ground two nights past. We have every reason to believe it was carried out by the Falls Road Arsonist but need our resident mind reader to confirm."

Will tries and fails not to flinch as *mind reader* leaves Jack's dark mouth.

Jack looks at him. "Are you ready?" he asks and then, "Just Will," as both Hannibal and the other agent take a step forward.

A flare of panic shoots through Will. A high, piercing whine gathers in his throat. He inhales a shaky breath and smells leather, grass, and steel – *Hannibal* – a moment before he feels the alpha's gloved hand on the back of his neck. Hannibal grips Will's trapezius muscles with his forefinger and thumb and squeezes softly. Liquid heat snakes down Will's spine.

Beside Will, the other agent frowns. "Agent Crawford, this is highly unusual."

The air grows steadily more humid. Around the anxiety and the threat of rain and a clap of brilliant, feverish lightning in the distance, Will raises his head to look at Hannibal. All at once, the sounds and scents are drowned out by the blistering heat surrounding the alpha like a second skin.

Will doesn't need to scent the air to know what Hannibal is feeling. The alpha is radiating *protectiveness, desire, possessiveness*, and a feral need to wrap his arms around Will and drag him bodily back to his car.

Hannibal's internal monologue is as clear as if the letters were displayed in neon lighting above his head: *I am here. You are safe. You will be coming home with me tonight, my precious thing. Jack cannot – will not – have you.*

Will swallows. Hannibal removes his hand from the back of Will's neck to lay it against Will's cheek. Will closes his eyes and leans into Hannibal's hand

Jack and the other agent are having a quiet but intense argument. Finally, Jack throws his arms out to either side of himself. “Will has always done this . . . his *thing* alone and that’s how he’ll do it now. You can take it up with Prurnell. Will?”

Hannibal gives Will a small, soft smile. “I’ll be right here. You won’t be out of my sight for a moment.”

Will shoves his fists deep into his pockets and follows Jack. The tropical bog of the hurricane is slowly giving way to wintery air.

They stop a few feet in front of the house, directly before the white pillar. To avoid looking at it, Will turns to Jack. He’s met with a cool, calculating look that tightens his stomach.

“Of course it’s the Falls Road Arsonist,” Will says through clenched and shivering teeth. “You didn’t need me to tell you that. And I’m pretty sure you’re not allowed to interrogate me without my alpha present. Though kudos for separating us so neatly. That was well done. Textbook, even.”

Will only just manages to prevent the wince he feels tugging at his cheekbones from showing on his face. *Jesus mother of holy fucking Christ*, how is he possibly fucking this up already? He spends a few seconds berating himself, uncaring of the scents he may be releasing or the increasingly concerned way Jack’s looking at him.

Finally, after a few more seconds (*stupid, Will, stupid, stupid, fucking stupid*), he closes his eyes and tips his head back. It’s a gesture that conveys frustration, though it’s really meant to provide Jack with a view of his collar. A reminder of how notoriously difficult it is to prosecute omegas for capital crimes.

The sweet, docile things they are.

He speaks from behind his closed eyelids. “I’m not the arsonist, Jack.”

He opens his eyes in time to see Jack turn back towards the pillar and the devastation beyond.

“Let me tell you what I think,” Jack says. “I think we found your fingerprints and hair at every single one of these crime scenes.”

“Good. You’d have to fire your entire staff otherwise. You do know I was homed by all of the victims at one point, right?”

“A coincidence, then.”

“A fact. The omega-to-alpha ratio is like one to a hundred or something. I’d bet a foot if not a whole leg you found a few other omegas’ DNA at more than one of the houses.”

“Only yours was at all of them. Is *that* a coincidence?”

“No, it’s another fact. I’ve been homed . . . frequently. More than is normal.”

Jack adjusts his stance, from one foot to the other, and puffs a breath of air towards the twisted rinds of the burned house. “We’ve interviewed some of the other omegas. They talked a lot about Tier’s basement. You saw it, too?”

Will flinches before he can stop himself, shying away from both Jack and the memory alike. From behind his breastbone, Will shoves aside the creeping anxiety that’s threatening to rob him of breath to unearth a little omegan whine turned sour with disgust.

“Yeah, but I didn’t *kill* him for it. I mean, sure, he was a piece of alphan shit. But even if I did think being a dick was worth a death sentence, this is a pretty extreme reaction. And when have you ever known me to take an interest in fire, of all random things? When would I have even done this?”

“I’m not going to pretend to know your schedule,” Jack says. “As for the why? Retribution is an easy enough motive to guess. Or maybe you were trying to tip the scales back in your favor.”

“Back in my-“

“I was with you at the crime scene, the one at Druid Hill Park. When you-when you had your first heat. The look on your face . . .” Jack trails off and then clears his throat. His eyes remain fixed on the house. “I’ve also seen your file from the institute. You’re more than a little prone to physical violence. It’s extremely unusual for your gender.”

Will exhales a furious huff through his nose, even as anxiety grips his vocal cords. “Maybe, but it’s spot-fucking-on for the notoriously unstable Will Graham who’s just had his entire fucking life ripped out from under his feet. *Jesus*, Jack, use your brain. And have some fucking empathy.” He turns, intending to storm back towards Hannibal and demand they return to the manor, but stops. “Don’t call me again, me or Hannibal. I’m done doing this.”

Heat flares like a riot across his palms as he stomps through the snow. Seeing his furious approach, Hannibal and the agent stop chatting to watch him. The agent’s face is expressionless and Will feels the force of it like a brick in his stomach. Hannibal is smiling a fond, closed-lip smile that eases a little of the tension around his chest.

Will passes them both without slowing, his arm shooting out to grip Hannibal’s sleeve. Hannibal follows easily, allowing Will to manhandle him back to the car.

In the passenger seat, Will grips his hair between his fingers. “Drive,” he says, and Hannibal does.

* * * * *

When they return to the manor, Hannibal locks himself in his office. He watches the sun set against the far wall or, when he thinks to turn around, from the window behind his desk. The falling light pulls the shadows of the room down with it, spreading them like ink spills until he can no longer tell where the shadows end and the wall begins.

Remarkable. Beautiful. Masterful.

It's the colorlessness of the falling sun, the moment the light finally loses purchase in the sky in favor of the approaching night, that finally chases him from the office. When he emerges, he's uncertain of many more things than he had been. Nevertheless, it was time well spent; he now holds a few crucial pieces of new data.

First, his affection for Will has made him reckless.

Second, he's willing to lose the life he's carefully constructed for himself in Baltimore, another professional license included, should they need to run.

And finally, there is nothing short of Hannibal exchanging his life for Will's that will prevent him from saving the omega from the sea. Up to and including Stockholm Syndrome.

He finds Will standing still and quiet, turned toward the sliding glass door in the kitchen. The omega holds a cup of coffee in one hand despite the late hour. On the kitchen island is a second cup, still warm and steaming faintly. Next to it, Hannibal's porcelain sugar bowl sits open. A small pewter spoon is wet against the stainless steel countertop.

There is a deep divot in the sugar and, in the middle, two faint oval streaks in the precise shape of human fingers.

Hannibal wonders at Will's mood. If it was petulance or only impatience that drove him to use his hands. He must have been scowling at the kitchen counter, stirring what must have been heaping spoonful after heaping spoonful of sugar into his cup, only to use his fingers to take a little more. Perhaps his eyes had darted towards the hallway and the closed door of Hannibal's office before he'd made the illicit dip. Perhaps not.

"I had to call Woodward to figure out how to use your coffee maker," Will says. "In case nobody's told you, it's ridiculous. Woodward agrees."

Hannibal smiles as he dips his index finger and thumb into the bowl, pinching a bit of sugar between them. He deposits it into his coffee cup and stirs. "Permit me my quirks, Will. They're harmless."

"Unlike mine."

"It would be borderline ludicrous to call what you do a quirk." Hannibal taps the spoon against the side of the mug and places it back on the counter. "Do you wish to speak about it?"

Will turns from the sliding glass door. "Do *you*?"

"Yes. But I will not insist unless you do."

"Unless—" Will sputters. Slowly, with a grimace, he turns back to the window. "So that's it, then? Decision made?"

Before Hannibal can speak, he pulls his spine a little straighter.

This.

This is what he has spent his time doing. While impossible, miraculous snow fell around them, while he approached Jack to inform him Will was no longer his, as the light dwindled in his office. The gut-wrenching, impossible, heady *this* that will leave them both out to drown on Will's inlet. That one, shadowy place Will has left himself in this world he can no longer exist omegan.

"Yes," Hannibal says, the 's' falling from his mouth like a hiss. "Decision made."

Will's breath hitches. "Okay," he says in a tone much too even for the piercing wave of salty seas, decaying fruit, *sadness* he releases into the room. "Okay. So, have you already called Jack?"

"Sweet boy, no." Hannibal brings his cup to his mouth to hide his smile. He takes a slow, pointed sip, maroon eyes meeting the reflection of electric blue in the glass door. "I intend to assist you."

"Assist me."

"In whatever capacity I am able. Until the tide either takes you, or--"

"There is no 'or,' Hannibal." Will faces him. Electric blue spins, conjuring a storm. "Anything else, including you, notwithstanding."

Hannibal swallows around a knot heavy in his throat. He lifts his mug. "In that case, until the tide."

Will stares at him for a moment longer before raising his own cup. "Until the tide."

The omega turns back to the sliding glass door. A perfect if not slightly wavering outline of his body is reflected back to the room. As is Hannibal's reflection, though it's set a little further back, cast a bit blurrier. Hannibal follows the deep cuts of shadow across the bridge of Will's nose, his forehead, one cheek, and wonders if he's already been sucked under the black whirlpool of the omega's sea.

In the glass, the reflection of Will's mouth gentles into a wide, easy smile. Hannibal smiles back. The dark sea spins.

* * * * *

The darkness follows Hannibal all throughout the next day.

At times, it's an amorphous blob in his periphery, flexing and waning in turns, as though unsure if Hannibal will submit to it. Other times, more often than not, it's already summoned the king's horses and men and they thunder towards him with a war cry that sounds like a death rattle.

Hannibal's patients have been unforgivingly dull. His advice borderline obscure.

He will assist Will in his destruction, yes. He already knows he'll find a particular pleasure in witnessing this omega, *his* omega, bloom and be nourished by the brimstone vengeance he

will put back on a world in which he'll forever be cast as a lesser being.

And so, he'll assist Will.

But he won't – cannot – lose him.

When Hannibal arrives home, it takes him a long moment to understand what he's seeing. His kitchen is in shambles.

Cupboards are thrown open, drawers half-open, half-closed, sagging where they remain on their tracks, in splinters on the ground where they do not. It seems that whatever items Will found that were not immediately destructible have been thrown across the room in as far and long an arc as the omega could manage. Scattered amongst spoons and knives and serving spoons are the sharp, glittering edges of broken plates, broken glass, and twisted metal.

Dead center among the destruction is Will.

The omega stands naked with his back to Hannibal, stretched tall and lean, his arms thrust over his head and bearing the weight of a glass cooking lid. At the sound of the front door closing, Will lowers the lid slowly to the kitchen island. In the same, slow movement, he turns to Hannibal. When he sees the alpha in the foyer, he falls into a low crouch, his legs spread out behind him and his hands before, as feral and stunning as Hannibal has ever seen him.

Will seems not to mind the thousands of splinters of broken glass and stone scattered around him as he adjusts his weight to the balls of his feet and his palms. A low, furious growl builds deep in his throat.

“Will-“ Hannibal says and it's all he can say before the sight of Will loping towards him on all fours robs him of breath.

Hannibal crouches in turn, not to defend, but to catch. As he'd caught Will on the second-floor landing the night he needed to be gentled. As he'd caught and held each peaked contortion of Will's discontented mouth. As he'd caught each flippant comment, each cruel word, each insult.

He will catch him again now, should the omega let him.

That is, until the scent reaches him.

Hannibal has been in the presence of omegas in heat. Has, when his need grows weary and his hand fails to satisfy his mounting tension, gone to the institute in search of something more. He's sat with them in the back of his chauffeur's car, felt the power and energy and gut-clenching *need* to conquer, to take, to have. And has, without fail, always waited. Waited. Waited until the omega was at home, in his bed, calmed in the presence of a slightly-less-than-unknown alpha and inflamed by their own desire, before he has taken, taken, taken.

Take him.

And so, it's with a kind of horror that trickles down his spine that he finds Will pinned beneath him. The omega's eyes are wide and his fingers are clawing into Hannibal's shoulders, the heavy scent of an approaching hurricane in the air.

Despite the storm, despite the terror high and alive on Will's face, it's Will's keening moan, the rhythmic thrusting of his hard, exposed cock into Hannibal's abdomen, the wet spot blossoming above Hannibal's navel that brings Hannibal back to himself.

His fingers ache as he loosens them from Will's upper arms. In a voice he doesn't recognize, he says, "Go upstairs. Pack an overnight bag."

Unrestrained, Will's hands fly to Hannibal's groin.

Neither of them flinches when Hannibal slams his hand down next to Will's head. "Now, Will."

On the front porch, free of the omega's scent and with his phone to his ear, his chauffeur accepts triple the usual price to escort them to an omegan hotel.

It takes Will the better part of an hour to join him. While he waits, Hannibal relieves the clench at his gut and his groin by committing to memory the decayed scent of freshly fallen snow outside the front porch. The spindly, dead manner of the wilted andromedas and other plants he has long since meant to replace. The lint that has somehow gathered, unbidden, into the depths of his coat pockets. He rubs the lint between his forefinger and thumb until it's small and hard and he can no longer tell whether it remains in his hand.

He holds his breath when the front door opens. Will has pulled a maroon sweater haphazardly over his curls, stretching the garment's neckline in the process so it sits uneven at his throat. It's one Hannibal had worn a few days ago. Will must have dug it out of his laundry basket. A search of the knapsack across Will's back reveals only Hannibal's bedding, crinkled and heavy with his scent. Will's face darkens with a rosy blush, not unlike the sweater he wears, as he pulls the unzipped backpack from Hannibal's searching fingers with a sneer.

In the backseat of the chauffeur's car, Will is nothing but scents and sounds.

Keens and honey and whimpers and musk. All of it coalesces above Hannibal's head like a storm cloud. Hannibal is silent and still, even as the noisy fragrance beside him begins to fidget in earnest. He won't stir the air himself, though he's desperate to reach a hand up to it. It must feel like silk does against his skin.

"There's something wrong with me," Will breathes. Hannibal's fingers twitch. There's a flash of red and white streaks in Hannibal's periphery before Will grabs his hand and places it against the inseam of his pajama pants. Hannibal turns his hand quickly to gather and cup Will's fingers around his thumb, bringing Will's knuckles to his mouth. He presses his lips to them. Will's mouth pulls back to expose his teeth.

"There's nothing wrong with you, mon petit." Hannibal fans the words across the back of Will's hand, intending, as he always does, to both soothe and inflame. He can't help grinning

as Will sputters indignance with an arch to his back that could retire the Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile with shame.

Will moves with a graceless fury across the backseat of the car, slipping with waxy sounds on the faux leather to breach the distance between them. His forehead hits Hannibal's ear, his teeth on Hannibal's lobe.

Will's breath is hot and wet. "Are you taking me to Matthew?"

It's only then Hannibal recalls the chauffeur sitting silently in the front seat. His small black eyes are wide and staring in the rearview mirror and, as Hannibal meets them, widen further. A loose, squirming feeling beats against his chest.

To the beady little eyes, he says, "Acknowledge us again and you lose your head."

"*Extreme*," Will purrs, delight and shock at war as he huffs a surprised little noise that is chased almost at once by roaming hands at Hannibal's stomach, his belt and then lower, until Hannibal feels Will's too-firm grasp at his groin.

Hannibal grips his wrist. Will's purr sharpens.

"I'm taking you to an omegan hotel to ride out your heat. Sit back in your seat."

"*Hannibal*," Will whines softly.

For a moment - a brief, lilted moment in which Hannibal presses his ear hard against the omega's ravaging lips - he's almost overcome. It's only a moment, though, as long as Will's patience lasts, before Will's teeth bite savagely on his earlobe.

"Enough," Hannibal snaps. He wades through scents and sounds until Will is upright beside him. Goosebumps rupture below his ear. "You are not a slave to your instincts. Control yourself before you embarrass us further."

A long, slow moment unfolds in the silence of the car. It has rough edges. It expands and expands and expands, even as Hannibal turns his head towards the window and presses his shoulder into the door.

"Take me to the institute," Will says in a low voice.

Without feeling, Hannibal taps at his coat pockets until he finds his cell phone. He goes to his contacts, chooses the appropriate number, and listens to it ring once, twice, before a dull but agreeable female voice informs him that he has reached the Baltimore State Hospital for Omegan Welfare and wonders how she might direct his call.

"Matthew . . ." he looks at Will, who shrugs at his knees. "Matthew the orderly, please, concerning Will Graham. It's urgent."

Moments pass and with them, the ugly unfolding begins to take shape into something red and leaking.

The orderly is breathless when he picks up the phone. “Will, hey. Hey, man, is everything okay? What’s going on?”

“You’re speaking with Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

A pause, a hard swallow, and the image of an unseemly Adam’s apple bobbing with effort meets Hannibal over the line. “Oh, hello Dr. Lecter. Is everything all right?”

Hannibal gives him the address for the omegan hotel as the chauffeur’s car pulls alongside it. With promises and reassurances, the orderly conveys his understanding. Hannibal considers dropping his phone into the dark murky puddle next to the curb as he exits the car and again when he asks the chauffeur to wait.

Will fidgets in the lobby. It’s decorated in all manner of calm and soothing: light, earthy tones, furniture draped in silk and microfiber and satin, a water fountain in the shape of a cherub bubbling in a gleeful manner that only darkens Hannibal’s mood.

“Why are you doing this?” Will asks, clutching his backpack.

“Because I have no other choice.”

“I want to go back to the manor. *That’s* my choice.”

“We discussed this,” Hannibal says. “Twice. I can’t make this decision for you, and you can’t make it while in active heat. Even Dr. Chilton required consent forms before permitting an alpha to home you while in heat, I’m sure. There is no other choice.”

Will glowers up from where he’s clutching the backpack to his chest. “Bullshit.” The scents of sweetened molasses and honeysuckle rise from his skin. In a low voice, he says, “You’ll happily watch me burn but won’t let me ride out my heat in the manor? You’re full of shit, this has nothing to do with *legalities*.”

Hannibal breaches the space between them until he’s dead center in the knot of cloying fragrance surrounding Will. “You are correct. I care little for the legal tightrope at present. I do, however, care about you. And I have no interest in using your body the way others have before me.”

Will bares his teeth. “But Matthew can.”

“You’ve chosen him before.”

Will turns towards the front desk. From over his shoulder, he sneers, “You *purchased* me, remember? It’s a bit late for moral grandstanding.”

The beta women behind the front desk are dressed in dreary beige clothing, devoid of jewelry or makeup. They look like photocopies of photocopies of photocopies.

“Hello, sirs,” one greets with a tempered smile. “Do you have a reservation?”

With how Will is sweating, hugging his backpack to his chest and teething its zipper, Hannibal is grateful for the photographed woman's apparent fortitude. "Will Graham. A room for two. Three nights, which I will extend upon the hotel's recommendation. A second individual will be joining Mr. Graham shortly. A gentleman named Matthew, last name unknown."

Beside him, Will hunkers down around the backpack.

The woman's placid smile doesn't waiver as she looks at Will. "Matthew will be joining you?"

Hannibal looks away, across the wide expanse of the front desk, but can't ignore the nod of Will's head as it avalanches the scents of honey and musk towards him.

"If that's all, we'd be pleased to escort Mr. Graham to his room."

Hannibal looks at her. She's implacable. A fortress of calm airs and a dying sun against an animal that is clawing and gnashing its teeth behind Hannibal's breastbone.

"Sir."

Hannibal steps back from the front desk. He moves further away, towards the hotel's front doors. Away, far away, so removed from that moment that he doesn't come back to himself until he's prone on the leather sofa in his study, four empty wine bottles on the rug before the fireplace, his sketchbook open and alive with nothing but the curve of Will's lips drawn in devastating black ink.

* * * * *

There is tar, grimy and wet, coating Hannibal's teeth when he wakes.

At first, he's unsure where he is. He responds to the silent, shrill cry of alarm by bracing his hands beneath him - one on the spread of leather, the other on a wooden floor - and rears. The effort is halted at once by the papery sucking noise of his cheek separating from the leather sofa below him.

Just like that, he recalls himself to his study. And, with a flinch, to the weight of the previous day.

For a long moment, he sits with his elbows against his knees and his head in his hands. Only when the moment tips from reflective to indulgent does he stir. Deep lungfuls of sour-smelling air do little to quell the ominous roil in his stomach. Still, he breathes until he's sure he can stand.

He stops in the hallway between the study and the kitchen where thoughts of coffee and lightly scrambled eggs calm the worst of his torment. He presses his forehead to the cool wall and takes three, four, five deep breaths in the hope of easing the new ache gathering in his throat.

He'd flagellated himself sufficiently after the second and third bottles of wine, only to realize the root cause of his current predicament was nothing more profound than sheer sentimentality. At first, he'd berated whatever immeasurable stupidity and lack of foresight had chased away the knowledge of what Will's file from the institute had warned him of.

Heat cycles erratic, unusually draining, possibly commenced by stress/strong emotion. Violent tendencies when needs are unfulfilled. Limited desire to nest.

Possibly commenced by stress/strong emotion.

Gideon.

Jack.

Tier.

He knows the mistake he'd made. He's less certain, even now, that he could stop himself from making it again, should the opportunity present itself a second time. It had been the mere *thought* of watching Will in situ at a crime scene, the thin possibility that Hannibal might witness his stunning boy talk his way out of Jack suspicions. . . . That is what had pushed away any thought of Will's impending heat and how the stress of the situation might impact it.

Hannibal had gotten in his own way. And now Will was spending his heat-

Hannibal cut the thought off at the pass. He would make it up to the omega. And soon.

For the moment, though, his activities will be constrained to making coffee. For the first time in living memory, he's displeased with how long it takes the Belgian press to finish its roast. With a sigh, he sits at the island and rests his cheek against the cool steel of the countertop.

His coffee is untouched and growing cold when the doorbell rings.

Matthew stands on the far side of the front porch. He's dressed in the institute's starched whites, standing with one foot on the porch, the other on the step below. Hannibal wonders, fleeting, why the beta has positioned himself so far back from the door before the combined desires to crouch and pounce, to *destroy* punch viciously at his gut.

The beta won't look at him, but Hannibal stares. Matthew's hands are clenched into the pockets of his coat, his shoulders are high and tense around his ears. He shrinks further as Hannibal slowly spreads his legs, holds his carriage higher.

Hannibal swallows some of the tar coating his teeth.

The beta looks at him.

It would have been cruel to consider the marks, the scratches, the bruises, the half-dozen imprints of teeth across the orderly's face *injuries*, for they exist with such consistency as to simply be an injury devoid of borders.

Good.

The orderly huffs as Hannibal gestures him inside. Hannibal points to the kitchen counter and the orderly takes one of the barstools, climbing onto it slowly and with a wince. Hannibal removes a cold compress from the freezer. The orderly takes it without a word, pressing it against one eye that's grown dark and purple with bruises.

"One moment," Hannibal says.

He moves to his home office where he deposits a number of instruments and various medical supplies into a leather satchel. Back in the kitchen, the orderly is a replica of Hannibal when the doorbell had rung: one cheek pressed to the cold steel of the counter, the compress pressed firmly to the other side of his face.

"Did you drive here?"

The orderly shakes his head and mutters 'taxi' under his breath.

"Will you come with me?" Hannibal asks. He grabs a coat from the limbed rack in the foyer.

The orderly is infuriatingly slow as he rises from the barstool to follow Hannibal to his car.

The heart of Baltimore flashes by in skips and grunts as Hannibal drives. Beside him, Matthew is quiet.

"He's not usually this bad," Matthew says after a few minutes. He's leaning against the car window, the compress pressed to the other side of his battered face. His bottom teeth fret over his upper lip. "He's always kind of aggressive when in heat. Needs a lot of gentling. Nothing crazy, you know, but he's not like the other ones. They're usually soft and sweet and Will-" the orderly sighs, shifting a little lower in the seat. "Will needs to be calmed down, sometimes, like, a lot before he's willing to, uh, you know. Which is why they always sent me, I think. 'Cause I'm not an alpha and Will probably wouldn't like having an alpha anyway and he's always liked me just fine. But he's out of control. I don't understand what's the matter. Last time he was in heat, he tried, you know, he's always a little aggressive. I always have some scratches and bruises, but I wasn't complaining 'cause that sort of thing's fine by me-"

"Focus, Matthew."

Matthew takes a deep, shaky breath. "He was begging me to, uh, well, to touch him. But every time I got close, he just went crazy. And I just-I called you so many times. Your number's in our records, you know, but I didn't know what to do. Will scared me. He scares a lot of the staff and the others at the institute when he's in heat, but he's never been like this. And I swear, I swear I thought he'd be normal, like he usually is, so I didn't have any tranqs or anything else on me to stop him and-" Matthew's breath hitches again. He swallows hard, loud enough for Hannibal to hear over the rumble of the car's engine. "He just wants you."

A sunrise blossoms across Hannibal's windshield. Birds sing. A chorus of cherubic, angel-faced children chant a solemn hymnal of prayer as Hannibal looks at the beta from the corner

of his eyes. “He asked rather specifically for you last night.”

“Yeah, well, he kept saying to touch him, but then kept saying I wasn’t you so I dunno. I tried calling you, but . . .”

“But?”

“Well, I called Dr. Chilton. What else was I supposed to do? I mean, Will was destroying the room and the noise was so loud. The front desk people kept knocking and asking if everything was okay.” The orderly raises a hand to his face. “Then they brought the guards and they got me out, but . . . You know Will. He used his extra abilities to kind of, like, freeze everyone. He might be in trouble. Like, real trouble. The ladies at the front desk were so mad.”

“I’m here now,” Hannibal says. The words taste sweet on the back of his tongue.

As they enter the hotel lobby, they’re stopped almost at once by one of the photocopied front desk attendants. “I apologize for the inconvenience-oh, Mr. Brown.” She looks at Hannibal. “Please tell me you’re Hannibal Lecter.”

The looming sunrise glistens from Hannibal’s forehead.

There’s silence as the elevator ascends. When the doors open, the beta woman takes a deep breath before she faces Hannibal. Distantly, he sees her mouth shape around words, but the sound is lost to the sight of the grass quivering just behind her and to the bowed branches of a cypress tree scratching against the open elevator door

He swallows a little more of the tar coating his teeth.

He follows the grass down one hallway and then another, opening his hand to feel the wispy stalks skip against his skin. He stops next to a handful of black-clad guards. They are all turned away from the end of the hallway, some with their head in their hands, others squinting around the tension gathered at their eyes.

The voice in Hannibal’s head is scathing.

Weak. Simple. Pathetic. Useless.

His instincts are loud.

The omega is in heat! Look at him! The poor, sweet thing. He needs you, Hannibal, he wants only you. Matthew said so. What are you waiting for?

Go to him!

Go!

Hannibal goes.

He wades through knee-high water, his feet sinking into and trapped by fragrant mud. He pushes aside grass and leaves, blinking against a crack of lightning that strikes the ground near his feet.

But when he parts a particularly dense knot of man-height growth to find Will naked and crouched before him, Hannibal has only one thought: *Mine*.

“Mine.”

Will shifts his stance in a way that sends an alarm of danger crashing down in Hannibal’s skull. The omega aims low, seeking to unbalance. But Hannibal is already standing on feet shoulder-width apart. His torso is already flexed, and so he catches Will neatly in his arms.

The force of the omega’s lunge drives Hannibal into the wall behind him. He sinks to the ground, his arms tight and locked around Will’s sweating heft. He expects Will to erupt into an immediate and savage violence, finds himself thrilling at the thought, only for the omega to whisper Hannibal’s name into his throat with a low groan.

Hannibal fears his ribs might crack at the sound. It’s not an omegan noise turned sugary sweet, but the sound of an exhausted man, desperate to keep his head above water long after he’d already started to drown.

Something dangerous stirs in Hannibal’s chest. “I have you, Will. You’re safe. Rest now.”

The hurricane dissolves around them. The guards at the other end of the hallway begin to unfold from their huddled positions. The beta woman squints towards him and Will, a photocopy of a wary but placated photocopy.

Hannibal and Will take notice of the orderly in the same moment. Hannibal, with his eyes. Will, as he inhales.

From a dark spot deep in his chest, Hannibal begins to *feel*. With it, he sees flashes of people he doesn’t know and places he hasn’t been. A white tabby cat with a pink collar. A tall, looming man. A grassy hill rising over a lake frozen in the clutch of winter. Just as he had when Will showed him the sea, the images and emotions coalesce into words.

A plain, simple man born to plain, simple circumstances who, after a lifetime wallowing in gray, finds a single streak of color in an omega who has given himself to another.

Will presses his forehead to Hannibal’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Matthew.”

Matthew flinches. There’s a brief, rueful grin at his mouth and then he’s turning, walking back down the corridor and towards the elevators.

Hannibal grips Will until his fingers ache.

Mine.

Heat

Chapter Summary

Will goes into heat and tells Hannibal about Mason Verger.

Chapter Notes

I can't put into words how unbelievably flattered and appreciative I am for the love shown for this little piece. Thank you, thank you, *thank you*. We're about two-thirds of the way through this fic!

Will wakes to darkness, bundled in blankets.

He considers struggling against the fabric that's oppressing him from all sides but stops when the sharp scent of another person hits him.

Alpha.

He inhales.

Hannibal.

The alpha is seated at the sofa on the far end of the room, legs crossed, his fingers running across a tablet perched on his knee. If he knows Will is awake, if he cares, he doesn't show it. It's only when he frowns at the electronic device as he scrolls that Will is certain he remains undetected.

Will continues to watch, even as the first pang of yearning pierces his lower belly. From somewhere far away, too far for Will to know with absolute certainty whether it's a memory or a heat-soaked dream, he hears the alpha promise him nothing, *nothing* sexual would occur so long as Will rides out his heat without the looming threat of emotional destruction.

Will intends to keep him to his word.

He untangles the blankets he – or, perhaps, the alpha – has thrown around him. In the gesture, he's viscerally attuned to the scents that billow from him. He watches slant eyed as the alpha inhales, blinks, and finally looks at Will.

"I'm hungry," Will says, faintly aware that while the lower half of his naked body is now free, he's kept the blankets secured tight around his face and neck.

The alpha stares at him for a long moment, his red-black irises tracing the outline of Will's exposed back, his buttocks, his thighs. Will feels his muscles tense as Hannibal's gaze rakes over them, ready to spring should the alpha move.

Slowly, Hannibal nods. His dilated pupils return to the tablet. "The kitchenette is sufficiently stocked. There are eggs, assorted meats, and vegetables. Considering the time of day, how does a western omelet sound?"

"Good," Will says, pushing his hips into the soft fabric beneath him. He swallows a low moan. The alpha's eyes dance to him before he collects himself from the couch and disappears to the small kitchen tucked into one corner of the suite.

Will is painfully hard and he dithers about whether to get dressed, touch himself quickly while Hannibal is out of sight, or simply walk, naked and erect, to join Hannibal in the kitchen.

Standing naked in the kitchen with Hannibal's maroon sweater thrown over his shoulder like a towel, Will still doesn't know what to do.

The thoughts come unbidden. *Powerful*, he thinks. *Strong*, as Hannibal reaches to open a cabinet over the sink. The fine hairs across his forearms glint dully in the morning light. An ash-brown lock falls across his forehead.

"Warm," Will blurts and is furious with himself.

Hannibal takes in the sight of Will – naked, aching hard, his sweater over one of Will's shoulders – and smiles. "Would you like me to adjust the thermostat?"

Will frowns, opens his mouth, closes it. He fights against his tongue and lips. "Warm," he says again, the word followed by a puff of frustrated air. He feels his eyebrows pull together and tries to convey what he can't seem to say - what he can't even put together in his head.

Hannibal pauses at the stove. His eyes skate across the contours of Will's face and Will pushes his eyebrows together harder, turns his lips down, and tries, tries to show. Though Hannibal says nothing, gives nothing away either in scent or expression, his eyes settle. Slowly he extends one arm to Will. "Come here."

Will is blinded by relief when he careens into Hannibal. The alpha exhales, teeters slightly, and then rights them both. His chuckle turns into a small laugh as Will rubs his forehead against the edge of the alpha's chest.

"Warm," Hannibal confirms.

At the small kitchen table, they sit as they do in Hannibal's dining room: Hannibal at its head, facing the kitchen, Will to his right. Will scoots his chair until their knees knock together. He spends a furious few seconds trying to dig his exposed toes under Hannibal's socked foot before the alpha seems to understand what he wants and lifts his foot to accommodate.

Will feels something like an automaton. He exists and can move with relative ease, but his mind has been lobotomized. He feels high and detached but clear.

He searches his memory for a similar feeling and recalls a long stint during his undergraduate years when he and his roommate would smoke weed and play video games far too late into the night. For weeks they would sit, exhausted through class after class, the caffeine they substituted for food making them twitch and aggravated but altogether failing to alleviate their mounting exhaustion.

And each night, right after Will had finished cooking or cleaning or studying, and there was an hour before he would need to go to bed should he wish to function at all the next day, a lazy sort of bliss fell like a gossamer curtain between him and the world around him. He would still be tired, yes, but so much more, he was content. A bone-deep, relaxed contentment that started in his chest and spread to tingle across his arms and legs.

In those moments, Will was weightless. Boneless. *Happy.*

Happy.

When he looks across the table, the alpha is smiling at him.

“What?” Will snaps.

“I haven’t a clue. Why are you smiling?”

Will tries to say. He tries to tell Hannibal about the memory from college and the bliss of that gossamer hour, but the words float away into the glow of the morning sun coming through the nearby window. He tilts one shoulder up and lets it fall.

He says, “Happy.”

* * * * *

Hannibal’s hunger grows.

Will takes to his heat with a sturdiness Hannibal can’t measure against any omega he’s known.

The suite is well-stocked with blankets, comforters, pillows, Styrofoam shapes, sleeping bags, all manner of soft, pliable fabrics from which Will could pick and choose his nesting materials. The living room and kitchen are separated by a large bathroom and a long, narrow, darkened room outfitted with plush carpet and walls upholstered in fabric, intended for the omega to construct his nest in.

Hannibal had watched Will consider and discard nearly all of the blankets and other materials from the bedroom, but otherwise seemed unable or unwilling to construct an actual nest. Instead, he spends much of the day laying on the ground in the main room, bundled in a simple cotton blanket which hides all but a tufted peak of curls at the top of his head, and follows the waning spread of the sun as it arches across the sky. Hannibal sits as quiet and still as he can, transfixed by the oddity of it all.

Hannibal's instincts riot against him, battering his ribcage and sternum and cervical spine. They demand that he *assist Will, help the omega*. The urges he feels in response – to fetch and pet and handle and care – are at war with the silent, supple creature himself who seems content to do little more but stare blindly out a window that overlooks nothing of worth. Hannibal only knows Will is alive at all because of the occasional way Will's hand dips lower in the blanket to stroke himself briefly before he again lays still.

Will turns from the window only when Hannibal moves. He feels the omega's eyes on him when he stands to use the restroom or pour himself a cup of water at the kitchen sink. Will's gaze is a calm, placid thing by outward appearance but carries with it a low-burning interest Hannibal doesn't understand. Only when he's settled back on the couch, his legs crossed and the tablet again open before him does Will turn back to his endless scan of the sky.

Hours into their silent day, with need clawing at him like a disease, Hannibal tentatively proposes Will might take pleasure in constructing a nest. A wet growl is Will's only response and despite its crudeness, puts the matter to rest.

He doesn't want to join Hannibal on the couch. Doesn't want to watch a movie. Doesn't want to listen to a podcast from the tablet clutched in Hannibal's aching, useless fingers.

Does Will want to eat something? Typically not. Sometimes. Without energy or apparent interest.

Care for him, care for him, care for him.

Does Will want to go for a walk? No.

Handle him.

Does Will want to listen to music? No. May Hannibal? No.

Give him what he wants, what he needs. Soothe him. Calm him. Take him. Take him, take him, take him.

Does Will want to take a shower? No. Maybe. Yes. Then, ultimately no, with a sneer and a collapse back onto the floor, his shoulders hunched and turned resolutely away from both Hannibal and the room at large.

Later still, Hannibal stirs from his silence on the couch. The omega's breaths have grown slower and it's only when Hannibal is reasonably certain Will has slipped into a restless doze that he decides he *must* leave. The roaring, gray tide of his absolute inability to provide is a heavy weight around his neck. The omega's stalwart indifference is a heavier one.

The notion to leave is fully formed, but Hannibal has not yet risen from the couch when Will bolts upright to face him with wide eyes. When he speaks, his voice is high and not altogether steady. "Where are you going?"

Hannibal responds to a suggestion from his instincts that he handle the omega lightly. "A quick walk, nothing more. A matter of leg stretching only."

“When will you be back?”

Hannibal checks the time on the stove in the kitchen. “No more than 20 minutes.” He removes his watch, sets a timer, and holds it out to Will. “It will beep when 20 minutes have passed. I will be back before then.”

The omega glances at it then back at Hannibal but doesn’t reach for it. His eyes scan the room once, twice before fixing on the television across the sofa. “Do you want to watch TV?” He frowns. “Do you watch TV?”

“Not typically, no.”

Will squirms under the blanket until he can climb up to his knees. “That podcast sounded interesting.”

“Would you like to listen to it?”

“Would *you*?” Will snaps back

“I would like to take a brief walk. I would be more than happy to listen to it with you when I return.”

Hannibal cocks his head to take in Will’s expression properly. He’s chewing on the inside of his lower lip, his head tilted to reveal a sliver of soft skin peeking out from under the bundle of fabric. His eyes dart wildly across the carpeted floor. Hannibal doesn’t need to scent the omega to know what Will is feeling: anxiety, and in spades.

Hannibal’s smile is genuine and feels soft. “Would you prefer I didn’t leave?”

Furiously, Will nods at the ground, drawing the folds of the blanket higher around his face. The weights clank noiselessly as they fall from Hannibal’s neck.

Will inhales and, all at once, his gaze fixes on Hannibal’s face. “Is that relief I’m smelling? You . . . did you think I wanted you to go?” Will asks but shakes his head immediately. He inhales again and droops a little under the blanket. “Oh. Right. Yeah, of course. An omega in heat and . . . I-I’m sorry, I-“

“It’s quite all right, Will,” Hannibal says with another soft smile. “Heats are trying experiences, even for omegas who embrace them. I did not wish to infringe on your efforts to control your experience.”

“Well, yeah, but . . .” Will trails off. He fidgets under the blanket, moving with a concentrated effort. Suddenly, a maroon sleeve of Hannibal’s sweater pops over an edge of the bunched cotton near Will’s mouth. “Actually, do you mind taking this and replacing it with-“ his face scrunches “-something, uh, newer? *God*, stop smiling.”

Hannibal retrieves the maroon sweater and takes off the one he’s wearing. He holds it out to the omega who gives him a flat look. Hannibal smiles as he pulls back the blanket from Will’s mouth to tuck it inside, until he feels Will’s fingers grip and tug it downward. The blue

fleece disappears into the blanket and Will collapses back onto the floor, shimmying until the fabric covers his head completely.

Hannibal breathes deeply into the maroon sweater. Honey, amber, other sweet, sticky scents and . . . he pauses, breathes again, and before he can reconsider, shakes the sweater crisply before donning it.

“Um,” is Will’s muffled, half-strained voice from under the blanket. “If you just put that on, you might want to reconsider. It’s been like a sweat lodge under this blanket.”

Hannibal hums, buoyed, and moves to the kitchen to prepare dinner. The tacky scent of Will’s spilled seed is like a propeller sailing him forward.

* * * * *

A brief scuffle ensues before dinner. Hannibal adamantly refuses to permit Will to eat on the floor and Will refuses to join him at the kitchen table.

“Fine,” Will all but shouts. “We’ll do it the American way.”

Hannibal is even more reluctant to accept this purported compromise but finds himself numbly transfixed as Will claws his way out of the blanket to stand lean and flushed, his hard cock bobbing ludicrously before him. He gathers the blanket which, Hannibal can see, had been folded around a sheet from Hannibal’s bed at the manor. Will grabs the television remote from the entertainment cabinet and bundles himself back up before falling with little grace onto the sofa. He turns on the television and glares at it.

In truth, the couch is ill-suited for the meal Hannibal has prepared. But the invitation to concede to the omega’s demand is far too potent to ignore. With an indulgent sigh – a noise he’s sure he’s adopted from Will – he retrieves two bowls from the kitchen cupboard and arranges the meal into small portions in each.

Will excavates his hands from the blanket and offers them to Hannibal who places a bowl in one and a fork in the other. Will finds, to his apparent delight, that the couch is a recliner and pulls on a little drawstring to kick the feet out. He settles back against the suede fabric, shimmies down until he’s at some proper angle, and sighs before digging into his meal.

Hannibal joins him. He cocks an eyebrow at the television. “What have you chosen for us to watch?”

Will points at the television with his fork. “A home-buying show. Some couple is shown a few fixer-uppers with the assistance of the host and the host fixes ‘em up.”

“What else occurs?”

Will shrugs, bringing a morsel of meat between his teeth. “That’s all.”

Hannibal smiles serenely, one eye on the screen, as Will mumbles his appreciation for the food.

After a few moments of quiet watching, Hannibal says, “I feel as though I’m misunderstanding its essential nature.”

By now, Will has emptied his bowl and is eyeing Hannibal’s. Silently, Hannibal tips his bowl towards the omega, who snags another piece of meat with a content little noise.

“It’s not that complicated.” Will’s voice is thick with unswallowed food. He reaches back towards Hannibal’s bowl. As he withdraws, a piece of steamed pepper falls from a tine and lands on Hannibal’s lap. With a mix of fondness and horror, he watches Will pick up the pepper, eat it, and then lick his thumb to rub it across the small stain on Hannibal’s trousers. “Each couple is shown some houses. They all need to be renovated. They pick one, the host renovates it, and the couple expresses their appreciation.”

“Do you also enjoy watching people purchase groceries or choose between competing mortgage lenders? I imagine it lights up similar areas of the brain.”

Will coughs around his food.

By the third episode, Hannibal is no more convinced of the show’s merit, except for the effect it has on Will.

“Bullshit,” Will says again, as he always has within the first thirty seconds of a new show. “How could they even afford that? She’s a stay-at-home mom to a dog and he’s a-a-what is he again?”

“A travelling musician.”

“Yes, exactly. Nonsense. Utter fucking nonsense.”

“Cartel money, undoubtedly.”

“A deceased relative.”

Beside Hannibal, Will has started to unravel. The omega seems to be oblivious to it, despite growing warmer and more fragrant as the hours pass. His hands are tucked back under the blanket but he’s wiggled it off of his head and unwound most of it from his shoulders. He kicks it from around his feet, exposing himself below the knee.

A few minutes later, he curses violently. “Jesus Christ, how hot is it in here?”

Hannibal stands and checks the thermostat in the hallway. “How are you feeling?” He moves the dial down a few notches

“Hot,” Will says. “Sticky.”

“Sticky?”

Will has positioned himself lengthwise on the couch, abandoning the blanket and Hannibal’s bedding in favor of the fleece pullover. It’s spread across his hips, an attempt and utter failure to make modest the decidedly immodest erection that tents the soft fabric.

“Shut up,” Will says. “I can feel your amusement from here. Let me keep what dignity I still have, all right?” He throws his arm across his eyes. In a quieter voice, he says, “I *hate* this.”

Hannibal makes a guttural cooing noise that causes a light flush to spread across Will’s torso. The omega flinches and presses the fleece pullover hard against his groin. “*Jesus*.”

“Lift your head,” Hannibal says, and Will obliges, turning to face the back of the couch. Hannibal seats himself and rests the omega’s head on his lap. He runs a palm softly against limp, damp curls. “You’re very warm.”

“Yeah, *thanks*,” Will says and then gasps as Hannibal traces the curve of his ear with a finger. His hips buck. “God, I just want this to be over.”

Hannibal makes the same rumbling cooing sound and Will’s hips spasm. It’s accompanied by a tight roll of his back and a noise he tries to hide by clamping his teeth together.

“I understand your heats have never been your own, not entirely,” Hannibal says. “But ideally, how would you manage if left to your own devices?”

“Probably just jerk off until something broke. Sleep when I wasn’t doing that.” Will grunts. “Doesn’t sound too bad when I put it like that.”

“I am not opposed to taking a walk. Or ten walks, over the next few days.” When Will opens one eye to peer at him, Hannibal smiles. “Or one hundred walks, should inspiration be so plentiful.”

Will buries his face into Hannibal’s lap, inhaling deeply. “I said I didn’t want you to go.”

“It would only be temporary.”

“What if you didn’t come back?”

“*Mon très cher petit*, why in the world wouldn’t I come back?”

Will groans. He snakes one hand under Hannibal’s thigh, gripping with fingertips that will bruise. His other hand winds down his chest, his thumb catching his nipple, before it disappears under the fleece pullover.

Hannibal doesn’t have the words to describe the compulsion to beauty that attaches to Will’s skin like a halo when he finally succumbs to his heat. It’s a concession that brings a taste to the air. It spills from the cavernous reach between the omega’s parted lips and is mirrored in the rhythmic thrusting of his hips into his hand.

Hannibal wants to consume, to devour, to lap at the noises and scents Will releases like sustenance. Instead, he begins to purr. The sound has an immediate effect on Will, who moans obscenely and clutches with renewed force at the underside of Hannibal’s thigh. Will presses his face more firmly into Hannibal’s lap, opening his mouth to rest his teeth against the hard length of Hannibal through his trousers.

Hannibal hums a pleased, content sound.

His mouth open, Will hisses. “*Shut up, Hannibal.*” His name must stroke something within Will to life, for in the next moment Will is repeating it like a mantra, his fingers curled around his own cock. “Hannibal. Hannibal. Hannibal.”

Will releases Hannibal’s thigh but doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hand. It flails, his fingers clenching at the air above his chest. Hannibal offers the omega his own, which Will grasps and brings to his mouth. For a moment, he only presses Hannibal’s hand to his lips, breathing against his knuckles, until Hannibal extends one, two fingers and pushes them into Will’s mouth.

Immediately, the omega’s mouth closes around the fingers, his eyes flying open to reveal glassy, half-present irises swallowed entirely by pupil. When they flutter close, thick lashes resting against pale cheeks turned rosy with heat, Hannibal presses down on his tongue. The groan that escapes Will sounds like reverence.

Will’s eyes fly open again and he tilts his head back to look, unseeing, at Hannibal. The hand around his cock slows. He tries to speak around Hannibal’s fingers. Saliva pools for a moment at the corner of his sharp mouth before it spills down the edge of his jawline. Hannibal removes his fingers to paint Will’s lips with it.

“I want . . . I want . . .”

“Anything, Will.”

With a piercing cry that makes Hannibal shiver, he says, “*I don’t know.*”

“Come here, straddle me,” Hannibal says, and Will obeys at once. The omega scrambles from the couch, slipping against the suede surface and all but falls into Hannibal’s lap. “Good, Will. So good. God, but look at you. How well you listen to me.”

Will headbutts Hannibal’s chest softly. Hannibal reaches for the omega’s straining cock, wet and red with the force of his heat, but Will bats it away to take himself in hand.

“Touch me,” Will breathes, and Hannibal does.

He runs his fingers, his palms, the curl of his knuckles across Will’s neck, his shoulders, his upper arms, the side of one cheek damp with sweat and tears. He dips them lower as Will rocks and pants, whines and breathes and Hannibal absorbs each noise as it comes. He touches with frenzy, with a heated, burning need that’s consuming him alive from the inside out.

Will rolls his hips at the first brush of Hannibal’s fingers against his opening and throws his head back. Hannibal stills, his bowels heavy with pleasure at the sight of the sweeping curve of Will’s neck. As the omega presents it to him. Something akin to a feral growl builds in his chest. The smile that parts Will’s lips has the force and fire of the sun.

Without ceremony, Hannibal slips a finger past Will’s opening, that first hard ring of muscles, and hums when the omega’s body draws him in further. Two fingers. Three, and Will’s head

is tipped back past the point of comfort, one hand gripping Hannibal's shoulder to stop him from toppling backwards.

Will cries out to the ceiling. He rides Hannibal's fingers without shame or mercy and it's all Hannibal can do to remain still, frozen at the force – the absolute, stunning force – of Will's beauty as he moves.

Will throws his head forward. Hannibal tenses, expecting violence, but it's only so the omega can stare at him with wide open eyes, glossy and distant. "Hannibal. More." Will brings the hand around his cock to his mouth, his pink tongue swiping across the pearly white spill of precum gathered in a glistening strand on his hand before pressing the fingers to Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal accepts them with a low crooning noise. "*More*. Please, Hannibal, *more*."

Hannibal scissors his fingers, stretching them around Will's broken cries of *yes*, of *Jesus*, of his own name. He wraps his fingers around Will's cock but pulls away when Will snarls in response. The snarl deepens as Will gropes for Hannibal's hand, finds it, and wraps it back around himself.

There are seconds of tense, undulating silence as Will holds his breath and slowly, slowly, *slowly* arches his back, sits firmly on the fingers roaming inside him, and brings both of his hands to Hannibal's shoulders so he can arch as far and away from Hannibal's torso as he can.

"Oh, Will, look at you. You are stunning. You are perfect, you are magnificent, you are immaculate," Hannibal whispers. Will curls himself tight to Hannibal's chest, his hard chin digging into Hannibal's shoulder.

A flurry of battered, half-mangled foreign sentences spill from Hannibal and he breathes them all into the ear pressed to his mouth.

Something within Will shifts, a desperation Hannibal can taste in the salt at Will's ears.

Quietly, Will says, "Please stop. Don't let go. Just . . . stop."

Hannibal stops. He stills his fingers inside the hot clutch of Will's opening. Stills his fingers around the omega's cock. Will unfurls his arms from against Hannibal's chest and wraps them around Hannibal's neck instead. He presses his mouth against Hannibal's neck as well to lap at the skin for a moment before he slowly shudders back to life, rocking against Hannibal's cupped hand, fucking himself ruthlessly on Hannibal's fingers. Hannibal lets him for there is nothing, *nothing* on the earth or in the heavens that would stop him from allowing Will to take his pleasure from Hannibal's body any way he can.

"Oh god, oh no, Hannibal--"

Experimentally, Hannibal flexes the fingers buried deep in Will's hot, wet, oppressive clutch.

"Oh no, oh no, I'm-Hannibal, I'm--"

Will lays his cheek against the decline between Hannibal's neck and shoulder, cursing and thrusting and moving under Hannibal's hands.

The wet noise of Hannibal's fingers is glorious in its obscenity. All Hannibal can think to say is "Will" with the worship he'd use to speak to a higher power. Whether Will hears him or is already past the precipice, Hannibal doesn't know. But the swooping, clenching pressure that builds within him as he feels Will pulse under and around his fingers is enough to ascend him to the realms of higher beings.

Will falls limp against Hannibal's chest. Eventually, the omega turns his head presses his face against Hannibal's neck. With a small, breathless laugh, he says, "*Jesus.*"

Hannibal withdraws his hands. Most of Will's release is spread across the back of his hand and his wrist. He wipes it on the maroon sweater. "A touch more won't hurt. At least until we find a washing machine."

Will buries his face in Hannibal shoulder.

With only a token of protest, Will allows Hannibal to carry him to the bedroom. In the depth of his heat, Will has lost anything resembling self-consciousness and spreads himself wide on the soft duvet. Hannibal steps into the bathroom to wash his hands and considers finding a new shirt before stripping instead.

His dick is so hard it hurts, but he ignores it as he splashes water on his face. When he rights himself, he finds Will standing at the threshold to the bathroom. "Will?"

Will shoulders slump. "I thought you might've taken a walk."

They rest on top of the duvet to let their skin dry completely. Will fidgets for a long moment beside Hannibal until, with a grunt, Hannibal pulls the omega half on top of himself. Will settles at once.

Hannibal is almost asleep when he feels Will's hand skim lightly down his torso to brush through his wiry pubic hairs.

"You stopped," Will whispers. "I asked you to stop and you did."

Hannibal grips the omega's wrist lightly, bringing Will's hand back to his chest. "Of course I did."

Will sighs deeply, exhausted, and says, "Fuck."

Hannibal hides his smile in soft brown curls.

* * * * *

Hours later, salt is again drying from Will's upper lip when he hears Hannibal say, "Tell me about Mason Verger."

"Mason Verger is a collector."

A single flare of silver-white light is all that breaches the bedroom. Hannibal bares it alone. With Hannibal on his back, his visible eye turned towards the ceiling, Will can see nothing of his hands, his hair, or his feet. The sliver of light illuminates curling hairs across one side of his chest, the graying stubble at his throat, up to the clean line of his jaw. One cheekbone is plowed high into a face already contoured by the sharp slashes of a hand pressed too firmly to the page.

Will runs his finger over the ridge. It sharpens as Hannibal smiles. Fangs are exposed, so Will runs his finger along them, too. They're wet and sturdy and very unlike the sharp line of lips above them.

"As far as I'm aware, he's still on house arrest," Hannibal says. Will's finger bobs as Hannibal speaks. He cups the pad of it under the tooth and waits for Hannibal to close his mouth. "I understand he is looking forward to having his name cleared. And he plans to sue the FBI for the damage you inflicted to his wellhouse."

Will's grin feels quick and hollow. He presses his finger harder when Hannibal refuses to bite. "We both know he won't go to jail."

"Tell me about Mason Verger."

"Convince you he deserves to die?"

Hannibal turns his head. Will's finger skips across more teeth, the edge of Hannibal's mouth, the violent upswing of his other cheekbone. Covered by darkness, he looks at Will. Will places a curled fist against the warm skin of Hannibal's cheek, right in the path of the light.

"I am untroubled by the thought of his death," Hannibal says, taking Will's hand in his own. He unbends Will's fingers to press them to his lips. "Why will *you* be his undoing?"

Will spins a tale that is not quite a tale so much as it's a weakened, hobbled version of his time at the Verger Estate. He can feel the words in the room with them, limping along as he speaks. Little broken swaying things. He can also hear the story crumble a little at its edges as he paints it in shades of gray instead of the euphoric splashes of greens and golds he feels when he says them.

He's certain Hannibal can feel the brittleness of it all. Though if he objects, if he intends on calling Will a liar for the half-truths on offer, it won't be tonight.

Will has told the full story only once, to Matthew the night the institute brought him back from the Verger Estate. Sobbing, weakened by his heat, he had begged to go back. Screamed and screamed, shrill and high into his bedroom, conjuring hurricanes and piles of ash and snow as high as his chest until even Matthew – poor, sweet Matthew – could no longer bear it and left to find help. He'd brought Chilton back with him who'd taken one long look at Will and ordered someone to fetch swaddling material.

Swaddling material.

At the time, the idea of it had soothed Will enough to get him back into his bed, only to lose his head completely when he was presented with what amounted to no more than a straitjacket stitched in omega-friendly fabric.

It had not soothed him. It had not calmed him. But it had bound his hands. And so, he'd been unable to summon the rain or the ash or the lightning.

In the little sliver of silver-white light, he curls and uncurls his fingers against Hannibal's naked chest. He knows, he's always known, that his hands are no different since he presented. Not really. They're softer, of course, and paler. His knuckles remain healed in the middle of winter. Even at night, when the slippery nature of all things in the dark covers them in crusted ash, they are still only hands and they are still only his.

To them, he says, "Mason Verger was terrifying in the pleasure he found being Mason Verger. And I was terrifying at his side."

Hannibal's hand weaves through his hair.

"His sister Margot is omegan. With enhanced abilities. The ability to detect the abilities of other omegas."

"What a priceless gift, for a man like Mason," Hannibal says. "And how did Margot describe you to her brother?"

"Ultimately? The combined abilities to detect lies and incapacitate an entire room at will."

"Margot was protecting you?"

Will smiles. "Maybe. I don't really know how her abilities work. I do know that she tried, as best she could, to protect me in other ways. To protect us all. So did Francis, one of the guards there."

"But they failed."

Will presses his finger against the dip in Hannibal's clavicle. "They tried. They . . . I think Margot will refuse to leave Mason's side, in the end. I don't want to talk about Margot."

Will speaks in more gray tones, of how Mason regularly met clients, customers, distributors, any manner of men willing to buy or trade in the fragilities of livestock and human omegas. He speaks of more than he's ever shared with Alana or Chilton. Far less than he'd shared with Matthew.

"I became invaluable. So many people dismissed Mason as a weak creature, the functional offspring of his father – the proper man to the name – showing up to meetings like he did with his tiny little omega sister on his left and me on his right. What a ridiculous thing, *omegan* bodyguards. And they weren't wrong, not really, but that wasn't the point. It started before that. Before Margot knew how to describe me to him. The events."

"Events."

“The estate is sprawling. There was a conference hall of sorts. A gallery. Cage upon cage where the omegas would perform their tricks for the guests. Margot . . . she knew what I was capable of. She kind of, I don’t know, dipped her head at me when they got to my cage. Said something like, ‘this one can detect emotions’ and moved on. And I, god, I was such an idiot, but the surprise must have been all over my face because Mason didn’t move with her. He was already dressed in a tuxedo and I was in the coveralls and just-I was so furious I was there. And he told me to show him. So, I did.”

Hannibal’s fingers flex against Will’s hip. “What did you show him?”

“The bayou. Or I tried to, anyway. I ended up . . . whatever memory got drudged up just scared him. When we came back to ourselves, he was kneeling on the ground and Margot looked horrified and I thought, well shit, this is it, this is how I die, and he was just . . . he was *elated*, doctor. *Thrilled*. I never saw another event after that. Only meetings. Tons of meetings. Where some jackass in an expensive suit would insist X or Y was his lowest price and I’d say, ‘he’s lying,’ just like that, to the room at large, like some fucking animatronic oracle. Invaluable. I really was.”

“Until.”

“Until I went into heat. There was a woman they had sort of assigned to wait on me and act like my walking, breathing calendar. She’d forgotten about some important meeting. I wasn’t there and Mason got hosed, and when I found out, the stress of it all . . . well, I went into heat.” Months later and still Will can’t help the clench at his jaw or the way his fingers threaten to tighten into a fist. The *unfairness*. The absurdity that one stupid little girl’s forgetfulness cost him so dearly. “Margot . . . she was usually-she was careful, most of the time to-” Will swallows. He fidgets a little against Hannibal’s side until the grip of the alpha’s arm around his waist tightens. “It doesn’t matter. I went into heat and Mason was there and I refused him.”

Will runs his finger across Hannibal’s chest, sculpts the line of a pectoral muscle illuminated by the sliver of light, brushes faintly over a nipple already wrinkled and hard. “He . . . insisted and I kept right on refusing. So, they took me from my rooms. They’d set me up in a sort of suite, like at the manor, once Mason saw how valuable I was. But after I refused him, they moved me back down to one of the cages under the wellhouse.”

Hannibal turns Will’s hand over on his chest and with a patient, knowing finger, traces the contours of his palm. Heat prickles under the touch. Will shivers.

“Tell me, my heart, what did you do?”

“I set my cage on fire.”

With his head in Hannibal’s oxters, the back of his hand on his chest, Will feels the slow, heavy roil of Hannibal’s spine as he shudders. At once, the alpha is atop him, his mouth at Will’s ear. “How?” he says, rolling his expanding erection against the comforter collected at Will’s waist.

Will tries to curl his fingers back into his palm but somehow, without his permission, his hands are already gripping Hannibal's shoulder. He clutches harder and is rewarded with another roll of Hannibal's hips.

Will throws his chin towards the ceiling with a peeling cry that sounds like the tinkle of bells. "I don't know."

"How?"

"I don't know, Hannibal. I just did. It just *happened*." Will arches his back towards the touch of Hannibal's fingertips as they move down his torso. "I get furious, raging mad and there's a tingle in my palms and a heat and then there's just fire. *Everywhere*."

With a growl, Hannibal flips Will to his stomach. Will bounces once against the soft bedding before he freezes with his face against the wrinkled material.

Present yourself.

The command is a low, burning demand of instinct in Will's gut.

Present yourself.

He feels the command in the divots of his hip and the vertebrae of his neck – an all-consuming, ravaging need to press his chest to the bed, hoist his ass in the air, and show himself in all his beauty to the strong, capable, willing alpha behind him.

He won't. He *can't*.

Lost in the miasmic battle of instincts and will, he cries, "*Alpha*."

Hannibal's weight is immediate and heavy against his back, pressing him securely to the mattress.

Relieved of choice, Will begins to purr.

The alpha thrusts in a slow, careful way against the cleft of Will's ass. Will thrusts back as best he can, enflamed and consumed by a sudden rush of his heat. His purrs take on a certain depth when Hannibal croons in appreciation. They move as they are for a long moment before, without warning, Hannibal drops heavily back on Will's spine, taking them both flush to the mattress.

Will is completely encased by Hannibal when the alpha presses his mouth to the pink crest of Will's ear. In a voice that sounds pained, he says, "I want to see you burn."

Will turns until they are chest-to-chest. He bares his teeth before flexing his fingers into claws and running them unforgivingly down Hannibal's back. The alpha shudders, his back curving to follow the path of Will's fingers.

Will is wide-eyed and helpless to the way Hannibal quivers as he digs his fingernails further into Hannibal's flesh. To punish, to shame, to incite violence, Will grabs as much of

Hannibal's hair as he can before the alpha recovers. A flash of lightning, the scent of ash, and Hannibal is smiling with teeth when Will pulls him closer.

Will whispers, "Take me to Mason Verger and you will."

Much later, curled into the arch of Hannibal's torso, he adjusts his position. Hannibal tightens his hold around Will's waist. They are both half-asleep, both half-awake with the need Will still feels pulsing through him like a heartbeat.

Hannibal's breath is warm and alive on the back of his neck. "I will take you to Mason Verger, but only if you agree to a favor first."

The Date

Chapter Summary

Post-heat, Will bends to Hannibal's request for a favor.

Hannibal stands at the floor-to-ceiling window in his office with a glass of wine.

There are yards and yards of curtains to either side of him, parted just enough for him to see outside. If he relaxes his eyesight and tilts his head one way or the other, he can look past the blurry silhouette of his own body to the rolling white lawn beyond.

It hasn't snowed recently. Even so, the soft blanket of what's already there is undisturbed by human or animal print. It had been an unexpected pleasure, the knowledge that the grounds outside his office would forever remain untouched by trespassers. It suggests he stands alone in the presence of the world at large, encased like a crown jewel in his office.

He swirls the rosé.

The fireplace at his back is as alive and vibrant as his own reflection when he notices the small tracks below the chestnut tree.

He steps towards the window with a frown.

He'd been staring point-blank at the spot where they appeared, as if from nowhere. As though the rodent that created them had been dropped without ceremony by a heavenly body intent on cruel little mischiefs-

He will drown soon enough, once the waters forget to recede.

Hannibal closes his eyes.

In the midst of Will's heat, he'd almost been able to shove that particular bit of knowledge deep enough into the back of his skull that he couldn't hear it even when it rattled for attention.

And rattle it does. Usually, when Hannibal is forced to examine it. Always, when Will feels most omegan.

When lying in bed, sweat-soaked and panting, Will had growled just as Hannibal flipped him easily against the mattress. Then, when Will had given a beautiful, high cry from nothing more than the press of Hannibal's fingers to his neck. Later, when Will's legs had trembled the second night in the hotel after Hannibal had brought him to orgasm twice in quick, successive bursts.

The knowledge of what Will intends to do . . . it had rattled all those times.

When Will feels weak. When he feels powerless. After he'd emerged from under the tide of instincts that drove him so magnificently into a tableau of perfection . . .

Yes.

Yes, the knowledge rattles.

And it has not stopped rattling since Hannibal had found the names in the back of Will's copy of *The Bountiful Duty*. With a scrap of sketching paper and his softest, thickest piece of charcoal, he'd rubbed out five names and addresses despite Will's messy attempts to wipe them clean. They were the same names he'd found buried in the pages of the Falls Road Arsonist's redrope folder.

Now, only one remains: *Mason Verger, 1 Quarry Road, Havre de Grace, MD*.

"I don't know what I'll do, you know, after," Will had said on the couch in the hotel, his voice muffled by both a blanket and his thumbnail.

Bundled as he'd been in the blankets, Hannibal had only been able to see his forehead and a single lock of damp, curly hair. He'd tugged the curl in a moment of affection.

Will had batted his hand away. "I haven't gotten that far. What I'll do once Mason is . . . once he's . . . I just-Hannibal, I can't go on like this. I *hate* this. I *hate* living like this. I can't. I'm tired. I don't want to do this anymore."

Better dead than omegan.

Hannibal had followed the thought with a touch to one of Will's knees. It had been such an underwhelming gesture. A limp thing, balked by the instincts of his gender and profession alike.

In his office, Hannibal presses his fingers to his stomach.

He will help his boy, yes. But he will not lose him.

He will *not* lose Will.

And there is nothing the omega can do to stop him.

If he must chain Will to the floor of his basement, he will. If he has to drug and drag Will to a remote cabin in the Himalayan mountains, he will. It'll matter little if Will fights or goes willingly or raises his palms to the heavens to summon the wrath of the devil himself, Will is going to survive. He *must*.

Hannibal smiles into the rim of his wine glass.

His affection for Will, his love – and by *God*, what a feeling it is - has cleaved a wound in his very soul. It's grown with alarming speed over the last few months, stretching and

accommodating whatever Will throws at him: sneers, laughs, sharp words and teeth and wit, and the way the omega's hips tilt to accept Hannibal's hand on his lower back.

Hannibal has consumed it all and remains ravenous for more.

He will not lose Will. He *cannot*. Not now.

Not when there's any possibility, no matter how improbable, that their monsters might stand together in the open, shoulder-to-shoulder. Not when his chest feels both squeezed and overflowing. Not when the sight of Will, the mere thought of him bursts like gunfire under his skin.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He fishes it out, taking a sip of wine as he does. He smiles around the swallow.

Will has texted a photograph of a sleek black garment bag lying flat on his bed. Fastened to the front is a small card on which Hannibal has written, "Please hang me in the closet."

Below the picture, Will texts, *Explain*.

It's far too easy for Hannibal to imagine Will's surly expression when he'd found the tuxedo. How beautifully he'd have fidgeted in the face of having clothes purchased *for him*. Yet another nod to his gender which always temporarily robs Will of his usual confidence. How the omega, in his beautiful fury, might have rubbed his fingers against the inside of his hands to soothe the prickle of heat, turning a gesture of imminent destruction into an innocuous tick.

Hannibal taps at the screen of his phone. *It would be my pleasure to take you on a date this weekend.*

Where?

An event downtown hosted by FAB. The Fraternity of Alphan Brotherhood.

The three dots of Will's reply start, stop, and don't reappear.

Hannibal realigns his shoulders. When he turns to look at the little divots in his otherwise pristine lawn, he finds the light outside has drawn too low for him to see anything other than his own blurry outline reflected back at him.

He draws the curtains closed and finishes the last of his wine in a single swallow.

At this very moment, Will might be unzipping the garment bag. It's unlikely he'll take heed of the pinned note, the defiant creature he is, so the bag will be opened on his bed. He might run his fingers against the cashmere fabric and curse softly under his breath. Perhaps he'd see – even like – the cut of the jacket, the small touches of ruffles and pleating the haberdasher had added.

The omega will be *breathtaking*.

Soft and delicate and furious all at once – an absolute treasure to behold. With Hannibal’s hand at his lower back and the cut of the tuxedo signaling Will’s gender from across any room, Will would have no choice but see how revered and precious his gender truly is.

And Hannibal will be at his side.

* * * * *

Friday night, Hannibal is sitting in the study with a glass of brandy in one hand and his cell phone in the other when Woodward finds him.

There are rare occasions when Hannibal finds himself grateful to have the mournful butler moping about the manor like a lost soul. Tonight is not one of those times.

Woodward is a remnant of the residence’s previous owner, an outspoken elderly alpha who wore sequins and stockings even when alone and who had offered to knock a considerable amount off the asking price if Hannibal agreed to keep Woodward in his employ for a set number of years.

At the time, Hannibal had eyed the hunched butler, who’d returned his look much like a dead man would, and agreed. He’d been certain Woodward would be dead before the month’s end.

Now, the beta stands at the edge of the study with the same bored, half-glazed expression, a garment bag draped over his arms.

“Sir,” Woodward says slowly, his chest heaving with a sigh. “The *omega*.”

They stare at each other for a long moment. Hannibal says, “. . . is dressed and ready to leave?”

“Sir,” Woodward says again and Hannibal fights the urge to sigh. “He is dressed, yes, and looks quite stunning if you’ll forgive me for saying. However, he believes you bought him the wrong clothing and nothing I say will change his mind.”

“The wrong clothing.”

At this, Woodward only cocks an eyebrow slowly. By the time it’s finally raised, the muscles in his forehead are quivering. “Mr. Graham is unfamiliar with traditional omegan clothing, sir.”

Hannibal nods at the garment bag. “What do you have there?”

“The suit you bought him for the dinner party. In case he wishes to change.”

“Please return the suit to Will’s closet. The omega will survive his discomfort for the evening.”

Hannibal is only partly down the second-story walkway when the first of Will’s cursed snarls reaches him. He pauses outside Will’s suit to scent the air. When he detects neither the

approach of a hurricane nor the hot threat of falling ash, he knocks softly. “Will? Are you almost ready?”

“Yeah,” Will says. His voice is an octave too high. “Yeah, just give me a minute.”

Hannibal pauses. He had expected one of two reactions to the tuxedo: either Will would wear it without realizing what he wore, like the docile beauty he so rarely was, or he’d stubbornly refuse to wear it and, possibly, set it on fire.

This deference to Hannibal’s choice is an unexpected yet pleasant surprise.

He presses his fingers to his stomach. “Does it fit you properly? Mr. Kravets is usually masterful in his measurements, but-“

Hannibal takes a step back as the door opens. Will’s face is already tinged pink with a soft flush, the fingers of the hand not gripping the edge of the door rubbing against his palm. His mouth is open in a livid sneer, though his expression softens a little when he meets Hannibal’s eyes.

Hannibal is *stunned*.

The tuxedo is expertly tailored, fitting the lean lines and soft curves of Will’s body as though poured around him. The outfit is, more or less, a typical tuxedo but for the detailing that makes it so explicitly omegan. The lapels are pleated instead of flat, the cummerbund worn outside the jacket to cinch around the omega’s waist, the lower half of the jacket stitched to flare out at the hip. The shirt underneath is white and fitted but doesn’t have a collar or a bowtie – instead, it is wide and cut a little lower than a typical t-shirt, intending to reveal the swan-like curve of its owner’s neck. A ribbon of black stitching winds around the edges to replicate a bowtie. A large, silver ornament the size of a dollar coin and shaped like the Greek omega symbol is pinned just above and to the right of the neckline. A suitable, *legally safe* substitute for a collar that nevertheless declares Will’s gender almost at once, should the tuxedo itself not.

The effect is elegant and enticing and much more than Hannibal had dared hope for. To his delight, he finds himself straightening the cuffs of his undershirt, flattening the lapels of his own jacket, *preening* at the sight of Will.

Will watches Hannibal fuss at himself, his cheeks darkening. “I look ridiculous. What the hell even is this?”

Hannibal hadn’t heard Woodward approach but preens even further at the butler’s soft sigh. “You are enchanting, Mr. Graham.”

“Oh, my god,” Will says. He begins to retreat into his suite, closing the door in front of him.

“Will,” Hannibal says, his tone dipping in a rumbling baritone. He extends a hand to catch the edge of the door before it closes. “Woodward is correct. You are breathtaking.” When Will’s eyes jump from Hannibal to Woodward, Hannibal leans in. “And we had a deal. I will

take you to Mason. In exchange, you permit me to show you just how exquisite you really are.”

“Nope,” Will says, shaking his head as the door closes further and the blush at his cheeks grows. “Nope, nope, nope.”

“Please, Will,” Hannibal says, removing his hand from the door to extend it to the omega instead. He’s intending to bring to mind the courtly manner of days gone. It’s an odd gesture, but one that his instincts respond to with appreciative purrs. The purrs grow louder when Will pauses. “You look beautiful. It would be my honor to escort you around town this evening.”

“*Beautiful*,” Will scoffs, mocking. “*Escort you*, I swear to god-“

“Please, Will.”

It’s an easy enough request. The sincerity Hannibal feels is clear in his tone. Still, Will fidgets. He runs his fingers through his hair and then again against his palms before skimming them slowly down the front of his jacket. “It’s soft,” he says quietly. All at once, the pendulum springs forward and with it comes Will’s bared teeth. “If we meet a single person I know tonight, I will set everything I see on fire.”

Hannibal is delighted at the rich, hot roil of pleasure that snakes up his spine at the words, even as Woodward makes a disapproving noise under his breath.

“Again,” Hannibal says, “it would be my pleasure.”

With his teeth bared, Will relents.

* * * * *

“What’s the Fraternity of Alphan Brotherhood?” Will asks.

He’s been agitated for most of the car ride, wiping his palms against his pants and touching ceaselessly at the edges of his jacket, trying to smooth the material down around his hips.

As Hannibal turns into a gas station near the manor, Will groans, “Oh, god, it’s not one of those alpha-omega social clubs, is it? Where everyone will be wearing masks, chanting, and some sort of ritual sacrifice will go down at exactly midnight?”

“Is that a reference to something?” Hannibal asks as he parks beside a pump. He ignores Will’s derisive snort and retrieves his wallet from his back pocket. “Please purchase a bottle of water while I get us gas.”

Will eyes the gauge in the dashboard, which proclaims there’s still three-quarters of a tank remaining. Hannibal meets Will’s raised brows with a placid smile. Will takes the proffered money with a shrug.

Hannibal stands with his hands in his pockets, watching Will’s exchange with the elderly woman tending the counter. He’s lived in the manor long enough to become familiar with the

kind old alpha who seems to be the gas station's only employee. This evening, she's reading a newspaper as she typically is, an unlit cigar at her mouth.

Will approaches the counter with a water bottle, raising his chin a little as though daring her to remark on his attire. To Hannibal's disappointment, the alpha does not at first take her eyes from the newspaper. She rings up the water bottle and takes the money from Will with indifference. It's only when she extends her hand to return Will's change that she looks at him.

A purr builds low in Hannibal's chest as the attendant stills. Will's hand is already open and cupped to receive the change, but he retracts it when she retracts hers. Hannibal can't hear their exchange but lets the purr spill into the chilly evening as the alpha's expression grows cautiously pleased. She leans forward on the counter, smiling in her kind way, to engage Will.

Will's face remains passive around the few words he says as he retrieves the water bottle and the change. It's only when he turns to walk back to the door of the shop that his lips part in a small, quick smile. He schools it back into indifference by the time he's out of the shop and approaching the car, only to stop when his eyes flick to Hannibal, who is standing with a massive grin and purring riotously into the otherwise empty lot.

Will looks over his shoulder at the alpha, who waves at him with a sweet smile. He scowls at the pavement. He yanks open the passenger side door when he reaches the car. "You could be more subtle," he says, sliding into the car and slamming the door behind him.

Hannibal returns the woman's jovial wave with a smile. He joins Will in the car. His smile broadens when Will curses that he didn't even *get* any gas.

"We made a deal, darling," Hannibal says to the mash of the omega's eyebrows and the way he sinks low in his seat.

"Like I really had a choice," Will snorts, folding his arms across his chest.

"You could have rejected my offer."

"You could have agreed without making it contingent on getting something you wanted first. You know, to be *nice*." Will shakes his head. "Fine. Peacock me all you want. It's whatever. This is it, right? All that I can be as an omega – an uneducated breeding machine my alpha can parade around like a trophy. Got it. Point made. That's the deal."

Hannibal starts the car and pulls onto the road, frowning at the way Will spits *my alpha* towards the dashboard. "That is not the point of this evening. My intent with the gas station attendant was only to show you that you look as beautiful as Woodward and I proclaimed. Nothing more."

Will shifts lower in his seat. "I want to go to a dive bar."

"Even if I knew what that was, I doubt it would hold the same appeal to you now as it did when you were living as a betan male. You're rather more conspicuous since presenting and less likely to blend into a crowd."

Will shifts even lower.

“It may surprise you to learn that America is one of the few countries that still hoards its omegas like treasures. While a certain deference is given to omegas in almost all cultures – the rare beauties you are – America is renowned for being a ghastly blight on the issue of omegan rights.”

“Too bad I’m in America.”

“In my homeland, for instance,” Hannibal says, ignoring the increasingly surly scent of Will in the closed space of his car, “omegan institutes were outlawed in the 1940s. Omegas live independent lives, alone or with partners and are viewed in much the same way as betan women are here. Prejudices still exist, of course, but omegas may attend college, own businesses and land, join the military, divorce and marry as they please. Anything they’d like. The same is true for most first-world countries. America is the notable exception.”

Will huffs. “Awesome. Again, thrilled I’m here in America. And unless you’re about to buy me a passport and let me run off to-” he pauses, glancing at Hannibal from the corner of his eyes.

“Lithuania.”

“-*Lithuania*, of all random places, I don’t see your point.” Will leans back into the seat, turning his head to stare out of the window.

Will grows quiet as they pull up to the restaurant. It’s a dashing, white-bricked manor house that vaguely resembles the peaks and arches of Hannibal’s childhood home. It’s far broader and higher than a typical house and, Hannibal knows, has been gutted inside and out to accommodate a restaurant and banquet hall.

Most importantly, the staff has been trained to ignore America’s penchant for deferring to alphan preferences. Will will be given as much attention and good manners as anyone else. His opinions will matter. His voice will be heard.

Hannibal pulls his car in line with others waiting at the valet. From a few cars before them, an alpha exits the front seat of a limousine. She opens the back door, extending her arm and smiling when an arm from within the car reaches back. A beautiful omega exits the backseat, clearly besotted by the alpha. They link arms and walk up the wide sweep of the manor’s front steps, their heads bowed together.

“What is this?” Will says, his voice a little less guarded as he watches the couple move towards the restaurant.

“One of the many establishments founded by the Fraternity of Alphan Brotherhood. A group that was started in America in the late 1700s. As many such groups do, its purpose has shifted and realigned in the years since, but it holds and has always held sacred a single tenant: alphas are human, betas are human, omegas are human, and their joining – in whatever form or abundance – should be revered. As you might expect, it’s a group that primarily attracts alphas and omegas who seek equivalence in their relationships.”

“*Abundance*,” Will mutters. “Sounds like a sex club. How long have you been a member?”

“Ever since I came to America and realized the appalling means by which it keeps its omegas. Many of the members are either first- or second-generation immigrants, though far from all.”

Will hums, distracted, his fingers perched on the windowsill of the car. He presses his nose lightly to the glass. A male omega wearing a floor-length silk ballgown passes them. Hannibal smiles when Will does.

Hannibal touches the back of Will’s hand softly. The omega’s fingers twitch though he doesn’t pull away. “You are not an abomination, Will,” he says as they pull alongside the valet. “You are not some precious thing to be coddled and doted over like a spoiled child until you die. The fault does not lie with you but with your country. That is the point of this evening and precisely what I intend to show you.”

* * * * *

As they leave the car, Hannibal’s hand comes to rest against Will’s lower back. It takes every bit of self-control Will has not to flinch away from it.

He’s standing on a knife’s edge.

There’s a part of him – a huge, overwhelming part growing louder by the day – that wants to give in. Close his eyes, tip his head back, and sink below the surface of a life as Hannibal’s omega.

It’s a potent thought.

He’ll want for very little. He’ll have a home again, regular meals, stimulating conversation, and more than modicum of respect from an alpha who’s as cunning and brilliant a man as Will had ever hoped to meet since presenting.

Adding to the thought is the fact that the alpha’s feelings for him run deep. He’s always looked at Will like Will is some long lost relic the doctor has spent his life searching for. But something’s shifted over the last few days. Hannibal has a clear possessive streak a mile wide. Since Will’s heat, though, there’s a . . . certain tenderness in the way Hannibal handles him. Like Will is little more than a fragile teacup that keeps insisting on hurtling itself to the ground.

Will has shown Hannibal the deepest, darkest trench he has in him. And instead of feeling fear or disgust or doing anything that resembles common sense (like calling Jack to his front door), Hannibal’s treating him like he suddenly has a *handle with care* sticker tacked to his forehead.

If Will gives in to the alpha’s care, embraces his own instincts and caves to Hannibal’s clear, obsessive need for him . . . it might even be easy.

The sheer hypocrisy of it strikes him with the force of a blow.

How could he justify doing what he's done to Randall and Nicholas and the other alphas, only to bend for Hannibal? Sure, Hannibal hasn't shown himself to be anything like the alphas Will's dispensed of in his efforts to turn himself over to the sea.

Except he has.

No, he hasn't locked Will in the basement like Randall had and demanded Will ride his heat out alone. Nor has he tried to force himself on Will like Mason.

But behind the pedigree and refinement lay something far more insidious: Hannibal preaches equality, but he's happy – thrilled even – to lean hard into typical alpha-omega dynamics if it gets him what he wants.

At Hannibal's core, he is a *selfish* man. And if Will gives in, it won't be because he's found himself a good partner. It'll be because he found a less terrible one.

He glances at Hannibal as they make their way up the front steps, only to look away as guilt twists painfully in his stomach.

At the door, they're stopped by a smiling beta with a clipboard who catalogues their entrance with the single-mindedness of an institute orderly. "Your husband?" she asks. She's wearing an elegant evening gown that highlights the massive swell of her breasts and hips.

Will looks back at Hannibal who says, "Of course."

"Table A3," she says, handing Hannibal a chip. He tucks it into the breast pocket of his tuxedo.

Hannibal bows his head to Will's ear as they depart from the beta. "A formality. The fraternity seeks to separate itself from the sexual kinks of our genders."

"*In whatever form and abundance*," Will parrots. "Polygamy abound but only if married. How progressive."

"Keep an open mind, please."

Will nods, annoyed by the way he ducks his head in deference to the request.

It really would be so easy to give in.

As they enter the restaurant properly, all thoughts of Hannibal and the sea are forgotten.

Will is immediately overcome by the sheer mass of people in the large room. The scents and sounds and intentions he absorbs unwittingly, *unwillingly* from the guests like an accidental maestro send his head spinning.

In front of him is a rotund beta with a cruel mouth who's leaning against the bar, surveilling a group of nearby omegas. Will inhales quickly, distressed when he detects the combined scents of *desire* and *annoyance* battling for dominance within the man as the beta decides how best to approach the group.

To Will's right is an aged alpha deep into lamentations of his youth, the exceedingly young omega seated partway on his lap looking beautiful and bored.

He scents *lust* and *pride* and *disappointment* and *joy* and – with a jolt that makes his heart thud – *fury* and *bone-deep embarrassment* as a beta flirts openly with an alpha at a nearby table, even while holding her partner's hand.

The low light in the room, the pleasant hum of music, the myriad of scents all poke at him relentlessly until, to his surprise, a whine slips between his teeth. The effect on those nearest him is immediate; heads turn in his direction, alphan and betan and omegan alike, all with the same slightly furrowed brow and pressed lips.

"Come, Will," Hannibal says, his voice low in Will's ear. Hannibal's hand is still on Will's lower back and he uses the contact to steer them into a coat closet.

Hannibal turns Will towards the wall and presses in from behind. Horrified, Will raises his arm to elbow Hannibal in the gut (or the dick, if he's lucky), only to still when Hannibal's thumb and finger cup the back of his neck.

Will *despises* it. He feels weak and submissive and little better than a dog who's exposed his belly at the first sign of an approaching threat. He flicks a shoulder at Hannibal's arm, even as the fight in him dies. "For fuck's sake, let go."

"Are you certain?"

Will rolls his shoulders again but says nothing as Hannibal presses his fingers deeper. A hot, liquid comfort ripples down his spine.

"Is it too much?" Hannibal asks in a whisper. "Are there too many people here?"

"*You're* too much," Will says. "Just give me a second."

Hannibal is not quite pressed flushed against Will's back but is close enough that Will feels the alpha's low rumbling purr against his spine. As much as he hates Hannibal's hand in his neck, he's even more furious at the rush of warmth and comfort and calm that seeps into him at the noise.

His instincts war with his reason, joyous at the prospect of an alphan protector so willing to keep safe what's his; annoyed and embarrassed that he finds comfort in having a protector at all.

"I'm fine," Will snaps, turning towards Hannibal. The alpha lets him go at once. His irises are more red than black and soft with affection. Will looks away. "A drink would help."

Hannibal takes a step back. He seems to want to say something, but only nods towards the room at large. "Table A3. I'll meet you there."

Will rolls his eyes and flattens the edges of his coat over his hips.

Hannibal goes to the bar. Will scans the room. The various high-top tables are small, seating no more than four or so guests comfortably. Each one is draped in a heavy, shimmering material that falls almost to the floor. Wreaths of garland flowers are strung around the steel intercrossed backings of each chair. Little placards in little metal grips are placed on each table, proclaiming their number. The table immediately before him is H4 and, to its right, B19. He frowns when the next table is M2.

Fighting a sigh, he straightens a little and dedicates himself to reading each card until he finds their table.

A few minutes later, standing between C7 and T22, he notices another room. He takes a few steps towards it. The men and women within are dressed down in button-ups and slacks. Most of them are holding drinks. A few play at a small handful of pool tables. TVs line the walls.

There's something very close to relief winding its way under his skin. This is a compromise he can handle: Hannibal got him to wear this ridiculous tuxedo, but that doesn't mean the night has to be ruined entirely. Will might even be willing to put the damnable suit on again if he could spend a few hours watch a baseball game while shooting a round of pool.

He's far from a pool shark and it's been years since he's played. But the mere *thought* of spending the evening gently ribbing Hannibal for his skills (since there's no conceivable plane of reality in which Dr. Hannibal Lecter plays pool) is enough to make him smile and ease a little of the guilt running circles in his chest.

He spots Hannibal leaning with cool elegance against the bar. Before Will can cross the room, he feels the slight press of fingers on his upper arm and a deep alphan purr in his ear. "My, my. Fancy running into you here."

Will flinches, a whine in his throat, before he catches the scent of the man beside him.

At the same time, the alpha takes a hasty step back. "Whoa, whoa, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. God, you still go from zero to sixty like that, huh?"

Will straightens, smoothing down the lapels of the jacket. Anthony Dimmond's hands are now in his pockets, though Will can see them flex when he turns to face the alpha properly.

Anthony grins. "You look good. I don't suppose you'd appreciate a low whistle?"

"Don't be stupid."

Anthony clutches at the lapels of his own tuxedo. "Oh, fair creature, you wound me so. Not entirely unlike my fair spouse, wherever in God's great name she is. Do you know-" Anthony pats the pockets of his jacket, retrieving his cell phone. He spends a few moments flicking at the screen before handing it to Will with a suggestive tilt to his eyebrows. Will hesitates, his hand halfway between them, before Anthony presses the device firmly into his palm. "Good lord, man, take it. This is exactly the last place someone is going to give you grief for using a smartphone. But look at it, look."

It takes Will a second to understand what he's seeing. It's clearly a photograph of the wooden workbench in Anthony's garage. The surface is marred by tools and flecks of paint in various colors, as Will had known it when he'd lived there. Behind it, he can see the bottommost row of Anthony's astounding tool rack and the dozen or so tools lining it.

Will smiles at the picture.

One night, in a fit of boredom and before Will had understood the full extent of what drove him to do it, he'd attempted to sort the tools into something resembling coherent piles. It had been a fruitless effort. Anthony collected tools like a magpie. Will had given it up as a bad job after finding a box of unopened jigs. He'd spent the rest of the evening clearing a small area of the workbench for himself. At one point, he'd looked up to find Anthony leaning against the jam of the garage door, offering him a cup of coffee and an amused but warm smile.

He'd only been homed by Anthony for a few weeks but had still managed to make an impressive number of fishing lures.

Will grows warm in the restaurant remembering how Anthony would come into the garage, a handful of supplies in hand that were brand new, though he'd always claimed to have just found them in the attic or the basement or wherever his little magpie piles were kept. He'd present them to Will with a toothy grin and a firm pat on the back.

"It's your workbench," Will says. "What am I missing?"

Anthony clicks his tongue and moves to stand next to Will so he can pinch at the screen. Will's gaze refocuses on a small grouping of trophies, ribbons, and certificates standing in a neat row.

"There!" Anthony says, pointing at the awards. "See?"

Will squints at the phone. One of the certificates reads *Craftmanship – First Place*. Beside it, a ribbon says *Most Original Lure – Honorable Mention*. Three similar ones are tacked on the tool rack next to it. One reads, *Best Use of Unconventional Materials – Second Place*.

Will rolls his eyes, handing the phone back. "You got into tying lures *after* I left?"

"No, you idiot. They're yours. I found a whole group of dorks like you online who enter these competitions. They call themselves lure-folk, which I do not recommend doing, but there's, like, dozens of you people. I had all these lures lying around, so I thought maybe some good could come of it. You spent so much damn time in the garage, after all."

"Well, your mother was a nightmare," Will murmurs, staring at the phone in Anthony's hand for a moment before taking it back. He looks again at the photo, enlarging it to read the trophies and certificates one by one.

"She still is and will probably outlive us all. Oh, wait!" Anthony says, flicking his finger across the screen. He goes through the next photographs quickly before returning to the first. "I took a picture of each lure before I mailed it out. So, you could see which one won what if

we ever ran into each other. Turns out you've got an online presence for this shit, man. Or well, I do, since I submit them under my name, but still."

Will tries to cycle through the photos but only makes it to the third one before, to his utter horror, he feels the prickle of tears behind his eyes. Without thinking, he leans towards Anthony. The alpha opens his arms and Will presses his forehead his chest.

"What-oh, jeez, don't *cry*," Anthony says with a soft laugh that turns into a little purr as Will nuzzles into the side of his neck. Anthony cups the back of Will's head softly, his fingers light in Will's hair. He smells mildly of *surprise*. "Jesus, man. You're making me alpha all over the place."

"Hello. I don't believe we've met."

Will sniffs noisily and pulls away from Anthony, still smiling. Hannibal stands a few paces back, a drink in each hand, looking calm and austere but for the slight tension in his shoulders.

"Hey," Will says, wiping at his face. "This is Anthony Dimmond, one of the first alphas that homed me."

Hannibal hands Will his drink. Closer, Will detects the quiet notes of *unease* and *concern* weaving through the forged steel and leather of Hannibal's natural scent. As Will takes the drink, he lays his fingers briefly over the back of Hannibal's hand to feed him *contentment*, *friendship*, *platonic affection*, whatever other bits and pieces he can pull from his own muddled emotions.

Hannibal's smile is a little less thin when he extends a hand to Anthony. It grows warmer when Anthony gives him a large, open-mouth smile in return. "Hannibal Lecter," he says. "Would you care to join Will and I at our table?"

Anthony pats Will's back as he looks around the room. "Sounds great, though I'll have to find my intrepid beast of a wife first."

"A3," Will calls as Anthony winds his way back through the crowd.

When he looks at Hannibal, the alpha is frowning at the spot where Anthony disappeared into the crowd. "Don't. Anthony isn't attracted to omegas. Or men, for that matter. He homed me to annoy his mother, who's a bit . . . puritan in her beliefs, I guess. He's great. Please don't be difficult."

Hannibal's eyes darken as they skip around Will's face, still wet and salty with drying tears. His eyes darken further as he slinks a hand to the small of Will's back. "If you insist. Have you found our table?"

The excitement is back in Will's chest. He points at the billiards room. "Actually, look."

Hannibal's gaze follows Will's hand.

“It . . . it’s been a while since I played pool. Or watched TV. I know you have me all dressed up . . .” Will swallows hard. Suddenly, he can’t meet Hannibal’s eye. “It’d been nice to, you know, relax a bit. And I’m not a terrible pool player. Might be fun.”

What little excitement he’d felt at seeing the billiards room dies when Hannibal turns his gaze back to him. There’s amusement in red-black flash of his eye and more than a little condescension.

Will’s instincts come alive, insisting he capitulate.

Tell him it’s okay! He bought you clothes, Will! He wanted you to feel pretty and cherished. Don’t ruin this for him!

Exactly, Will thinks. The voice in his head is scathing.

Will grits his teeth and plants his feet more firmly on the ground.

“Perhaps another night,” Hannibal says.

Despite himself, anger flares in Will’s palms. He runs his fingers against the inside of his hand. Hannibal’s eyes flick down to them. He says nothing.

“It’s fine,” Will says. He turns his back on the billiards room to face the high-top tables. “And no, I haven’t found our table.”

* * * * *

When Anthony Dimmond finally appears with his betan wife, Hannibal thinks *intrepid beast* may have just been the most perfectly articulated description of someone he’s never met. As they all shake hands and introduce themselves, he’s stuck on *which* beast, precisely.

Her large eyes and small, pinched mouth make him think of a mouse. Or an owl, perhaps, for the eyes alone. The thought is replaced almost at once by hawk when she turns their golden-orange hue to him and he sees something sharp and piercing glint from their depths.

“Mrs. Dimmond, a pleasure,” Hannibal says, standing to shake her hand.

“Fell,” she corrects neatly. “Lydia Fell.” When Hannibal cocks his head, she smiles. “Yes, *that* Lydia Fell. I’m sure you can understand the reluctance to give up my ancestral name.”

“Not that one needs a reason, of course, Dr. Fell,” Hannibal says, bringing the back of her hand to his lips in the fey of a kiss. “Though, if I may be so bold-“

“It would not be uncouth to ask me about my work and I would be thrilled to speak about it but only for a few minutes. Anthony grows tetchy when he’s not the center of attention.” To Hannibal’s delight, she pats her husband’s stomach with the back of her hand. “*Alphas*, am I right?”

She’s a snake. One of my own kind, perhaps.

He sits down on one of the high-backed chairs, scooting it closer to the edge of the table.

“Not quite,” Will murmurs to Hannibal as Lydia and Anthony fight momentarily over which glass of water is whose, the argument settled when Lydia unfolds her napkin with a flourish that hits Anthony mostly in the face. Will grins. “A bird of prey, maybe.”

“I did consider that.”

“It’s still not right.”

Will jumps when Lydia laughs – a cackling, ringing thing that is too loud and far from pleasant.

“Velociraptor,” Will chokes. At Hannibal’s questioning gaze, Will grabs Anthony’s phone from tabletop, tapping at the screen. “This.”

Hannibal nods at the picture. “Precisely.”

Lydia smacks Anthony’s hand where it’s poised to snatch her water glass and turns her amber eyes to Will. “So, Will, aside from inundating my sweet husband’s garage with your fishing lures, what other talents do you have?”

Will frowns. “Talents?”

“Anthony, really,” she breathes, smacking his hand again. “My goodness, man, just take the other glass. What a ridiculous little hill to die on.”

With a schoolboy grin, Anthony retrieves his own glass and sits back in his seat, one hand reaching out to twirl a strand of her hair around his index finger. “Of course, *amore mio*.”

“Talents, dear, talents,” Lydia says to Will. She takes Anthony’s hand in hers to kiss it before placing it into his lap. “Is it the word itself, or do you believe I’m either mocking you or making a euphemism of it?”

Hannibal watches Will inhale, his eyebrows pressed together. Slowly, Will says, “I think you are surprised that I asked for clarification and are now curious why.”

“Don’t tiptoe, Will,” Anthony says. “She needs a good reckoning.”

Will swallows and glances at Lydia and then at Hannibal, before ducking his head. His eyes on the table, he says, “You are unsure of my education or my knowledge of the world due, in part, to believing we’ve never met, but in larger part because I’m omegan. Despite whatever Anthony may have told you about me.” He glances at Hannibal again. “I’m aware you *are* educated, Dr. Fell. Thus, you felt it kindest to give me a number of options to choose from, in the event I truly had no idea why I asked for clarification.”

Lydia’s expression grows serious. She narrows her eyes. “*Believing we’ve never met?*”

“A few years ago,” Will says. “You gave a guest lecture on the motivations of alphan-omegan murders at Quantico. I-“

“Oh, Dr. Graham, of course!” Lydia says. “Of course, of course. You spent half of my lecture grilling me rather astutely on my interpretation of alphan motives. I daresay I felt like I was presenting my dissertation all over again. Terrible, you were.”

“I’m not a doctor,” Will says.

“What are you talking about, of course you are,” Lydia says, flagging down a waiter with a raised hand. “I’ve read your publications on the effects of cognitive dissonance in the mis-gendered in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis. I own your book, Dr. Graham. Masterful work, of course, all of it.”

Will’s smile is small and bruised, though he flushes. “Well, thank you. But I was in my last semester when I presented, so . . . not a doctor.”

“Though I will say I disagree with your definition of mis-gendered,” Lydia continues, plucking a roll from the basket in the center of the table. She divides it neatly with her butter knife. “Or rather, the term itself – it’s not really appropriate for what you’re trying to convey, is it? Though I agree, of course, with the conclusions you reached.”

Will smiles. “You’re not the first person to say that. But when you consider . . .”

Anthony flicks his wrist at Will and his wife, now leaning toward each other around the arc of the circular table. He looks at Hannibal. “So, what about our boy here caught your eye?”

“The curls,” Hannibal says, smiling as Will shoots him a withering look.

“Not the brooding angst, then? That’s what did it for me. Nothing gets me quite like steely-eyed hatred.”

Will redirects his glare. Over her shoulder, Lydia waves her fingers at her husband.

Hannibal relaxes back into his seat to watch Will. The omega uncurls from his discomfort in sweet little increments that tug at the piano wire. He isn’t surprised at how readily Will has taken to these new surroundings. It’s been a long time indeed since his instincts direct him towards the wrong course of action.

He’d known Will would blossom here, even tentatively, once he saw what possibilities lay before him.

Hannibal can offer him everything. *Anything*. Whatever the omega can dream – security, a home, affection, wealth, an equal partner with an equally ravishing mind to plumb the depths with.

He doesn’t want to just conquer Will. He wants to *possess* him, to own him, to breathe until he and Will breathe together. He wants Will smiling and brooding and glowering in every room of his manor, on every flat surface he owns. He wants Will furious and still and in his garden, barefoot and whining about how chilly the afternoon is despite refusing to dress for the weather. He wants Will in the sunroom, arched like a cat in the waning afternoon light. Arched like a demon in his bed, between Hannibal’s hands and wound in his silk sheets.

He wants Will pristine and shaved bare. Wants him unshowered for days so his natural musk spills onto everything he touches, and Hannibal might take to roaming the manor like a wanton beast in search of its mate. He wants to see the way Will's eyes, thick with both lashes and tears, blow wide just as Hannibal thrusts the last inch of himself down his hot, oppressive throat. He wants to see him sprawled on the leather sofa in the study, stomach distended from a meal, whining petulantly that he'd eaten too much again, *how had he done this again?*

Hannibal wants. And he will *have*.

Will's eyes dart to him. A soft flush spreads across the back of the omega's neck.

The first thing Hannibal will do when they return home is buy Will a gift. Something for the omega's pleasure alone. Some books, perhaps, that Hannibal can sprinkle amongst the shelves in the study. After time, he might even carve out a few dedicated spaces for Will to begin gathering his own collection.

He frowns.

What does Will enjoy reading, exactly? He always seems have a book in his hand, plastered with sticky notes on which he's scribble his thoughts or doodles or hard, strong lines that rip the paper and taint the pages below. Novels, manuscripts, journals, he reads it all. But what does he *enjoy* reading?

Hannibal makes to turn to Anthony, to ask whether he knows what Hannibal does not, but freezes. Had he not already been staring at the supple, wide length of Will's mouth, he might had missed the two words that drop from it like a harbinger.

Il Mostro.

There are wings beating somewhere behind Hannibal's eyes. He continues to turn towards Anthony, who is already giving him an expectant look, a fork and knife in his hands as he digs heartily into the steak au poivre of the evening's main dish.

"-of literature Will enjoys reading," Hannibal hears himself say.

Across the table, Lydia sighs. "A name I thought I'd never hear again. I was indeed living in Italy at the time. The city was in tumult for months."

"It's pretty rare, actually," Will says, nonchalant, interested, offering up Hannibal's past – his potential undoing – like a stray tidbit of gossip. "I mean that serial killers just, like, stop killing unless they're caught or die."

Next to Hannibal, Anthony purses his lips. "I don't think I've ever actually seen Will read. I'm not much of a reader myself. Don't keep a lot of books in the house."

Will says, "I thought I found him once here in Baltimore. But there's no way to be sure."

Lydia says, "In Baltimore? My goodness, say it's not true."

Anthony says, “Science fiction seems a pretty good bet.”

Lydia says, “But what about him captivated you so?”

Will’s mouth moves. White teeth separate and come together around the flash of a pink tongue. “There was a murder in Baltimore, maybe five or six years ago. It was-“ lips part, edges tilting up in rapture “-well, for my line of work, it was . . . I, uh, it was exceptional, if that makes sense.”

There is a low, quiet hum at the base of Hannibal’s skull. A flexing of the rarely used, animalistic foresight his medical journals forever refer to as the *reptilian brain*. The beating core of his instincts. The epicenter of where breath and heartbeat are so perfectly regulated outside his conscious control. Now, a bass note thrums there.

Fight or flee.

Stay or run.

Oh, but if only Hannibal could pause time.

It is miraculous, stunning, breathtaking thing of beauty to watch Will reveal Hannibal to himself.

Lydia’s hum is neutral. Will’s smile fades, and a corner of his mouth flickers down. *Self-conscious, unsure*. He peaks up at Lydia from under his lashes.

Saliva pools in Hannibal’s mouth. To Anthony, he says, “Why do you believe he prefers science fiction?”

”You know, I don’t know. You know when you look at someone and just know what kind of TV they watch or music they listen to?”

Hannibal must force his fingers to relax around the stem of his wine glass. “I’m afraid not.”

“Well, so,” Will says, “we – the FBI, I mean – we waited for another body because killers like that don’t just do it once. Not with skills-well, we waited. And it never came.” Will shrugs, looking at his plate as he separates a long, lean line of gristle from his steak.

Hannibal’s tongue darts from his mouth to mimic catching the dribble of grease left on Will’s lower lip.

“Oh, yes you do,” Anthony says, grinning. “You know exactly what I mean. You’re a head doctor after all, like my Lydia here. You all have that third-sight nonsense coded smack dab into your DNA.”

“I was curious,” Will says. “Poked around on INTERPOL and found Il Mostro.”

Pulse points erupt across Hannibal’s body.

Lydia grabs another roll from the basket. “And you believe he’s in Baltimore? Or was?”

Hannibal's jugular twitches, his femoral artery vibrates, his groin *aches*. The muscle and sinew of his body jump. He is overwhelmed, drowning in sensation, struck all at once by every compulsion he's ever had.

For the first time in a long time, his instincts battle against themselves.

Take the omega.

Run.

Slit every throat in the room.

Paint the omega in watercolors.

Fly back to Italy.

Take the omega here, now, on the table, take him, take him, take him—

Hannibal readjusts his grip on the steak knife.

Fight-

"I can assure you, Anthony, nothing is farther from the truth for psychiatrists," Hannibal says. "I've seen my fair share of narcissism and poor education in the field, of course. Though I strive personally, on behalf of the profession itself, to withhold judgment based on outward appearance alone."

-or flee.

Stay-

Anthony rolls his eyes. Lydia frowns. Will curls his shoulders a little towards his ears.

-or run.

"Okay, all right, Dr. Lecter, I hear you," Anthony says. "But let me guess – you like wine, French food, and classic music, right? It's in the stitching of you."

Take the omega. Take him, take him, take him-

Will raises his hand to tip it back and forth. "I'd bet, I dunno, something on the fact *Il Mostro* killed that guy here, yeah. But he's either dead, in jail, or has moved somewhere else so there's not much to do about it now."

Hannibal's cock twitches. The monster under his skin flexes cautiously. "Classical music, and yes, you are quite right. Though I most recently listened to the new Rammstein album. New might be generous. It must be two years old by now."

Anthony leans back in his chair, holding his palms out in submission. "Well, all right. I stand corrected." He recrosses his arms. "Sorta."

Hannibal *will* have Will in the manor. *Must* have him. Collared and pretty and docile and burning, low and hungry, with needs only Hannibal can fulfill. Prone on his bed, on the floor, a sneer high and alive and tugging at the piano wire in Hannibal's gut. Blisteringly hot and fragile and beautiful, so agonizing in his beauty-

Anthony snatches at Lydia's water glass with a deft hand and drains half of it in one long swallow. He winks at Hannibal. "So, when you're not listening to foreign death metal, what else do you do for fun?"

Lydia says, "Well, it's a shame you didn't catch him but goodness, I'll certainly sleep better knowing he's gone."

Will's smile is small and burnished.

Hannibal's monster is at full attention, black claws and red eyes alert and scanning the omega's face. Hannibal and his monster clench identical fists and both feels the press of nails in their respective palms.

Jack's words from their run-in at the institute repeat in his head. *Will is far too perceptive for his own good.*

"How awful, though." Lydia sighs. She clicks her tongue. "Just dreadful. Oh, but you're bringing back a wash of memories. I was there, you know, right there in Florence after they found his last victim. It had rained the night before. It's so funny, isn't it, what the mind holds on to? Anthony, what was the name of that Indian restaurant I used to like so much in Florence? The one we went to on holiday last year? It overlooked the Arno River, remember?" Lydia waves her fork before her husband can speak. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. But I just had a late dinner there the night before, right next to where they found the poor soul. What are the chances that the very next day . . ."

Hannibal inhales deeply. His eyes are fixed on Will.

The memory of Will's very first hurricane cuts a clean line through Hannibal's consciousness, pushing everything else aside. Will had been squatting before the ottoman in his bedroom, his fingers delicately pinning Hannibal's wrists, and in his beautiful chaos, Will's enhanced abilities had kicked into overdrive. They'd given Hannibal the scents the omega - or his instincts - believed Hannibal needed to calm himself after being struck by the vase.

Damp cobblestones. Cumin. Fresh blood.

And red wine.

The scents of *Il Mostro*.

Pleasure and desire and furious exhilaration shoot through Hannibal's veins like artillery splatter when Will's gaze meets his across the table.

The omega freezes.

Yes.

Yes.

Hannibal's blood runs hot and then brilliantly cold when Will's pupils dilate. Black swallows blue for a blistering few beats of Hannibal's heart until they shrink to pinpricks, leaving behind a navy tumult that looks much like sea on a bright night.

There are dead lights, far away.

The monster swells.

Fight or flight.

Stay or run.

Oh, by the Almighty, Hannibal would sell his very soul to Will Graham if he could.

Each muscle, every single individual muscle, from his *sternomastoid* to his *flexor digiti minimi brevis* pulses, contracts, wanes, and flexes in a tune out of synch with the frantic thump of his heart.

Fight or-

Will blinks once, twice, three times, and looks away.

The room loses its air.

-flight.

Hannibal thinks it must be ice. Or fire. Or a hurricane that's winding its way slowly under his skin as Will keeps his head bowed, loose curls hiding his eyes.

The monster hesitates.

Before he can stop himself, Hannibal retrieves the napkin from his lap and places it on the table. Will's eyes snap to him.

Hannibal says, "My sincerest apologies, but I'm afraid I've lost track of the time. I have a rather early plane to catch. Will?"

Anthony cranes his neck towards the front of the room. "The speeches haven't even started. Are you sure?"

"Oh, now, we certainly don't want to keep Dr. Lecter from his duties," Lydia says, patting her husband's wrist. "Hannibal, Will, what an interesting evening. I do hope you'll call on us for a less formal visit."

"It would be my pleasure," Hannibal says, his eyes on Will.

The omega appears to be curling into himself – eyes low, hunched shoulders, his neck exposed and tipped towards Anthony; baring himself to a worthy alpha that might come to

his rescue, save him from-

“Will,” Hannibal snaps.

Anthony frowns a little but doesn’t speak. Lydia smiles serenely at them both.

The eyes that meet Hannibal across the table are *wild*.

Next to Will at the valet, Hannibal stands on legs that feel like glass splinters.

In the car, Will cradles himself against the door as though he expects Hannibal to lash out with fists or teeth.

In the foyer of the manor, Will leans against the kitchen island, his back to Hannibal. The tips of his fingers against the stainless steel countertop are white.

Hannibal stands behind him, legs shoulder-width apart. He doesn’t bother to remove his coat before he speaks. “I imagine you’d like to discuss what happened tonight.”

Will turns towards Hannibal, his lips pulled back over his teeth.

Unease stirs quietly in Hannibal’s gut, nudging against the piano wire. “You called what I did remarkable. Beautiful. Masterful. Do you remember?” There’s a desperate edge to his words that he doesn’t like the sound of. He takes a small step forward. “You’d never seen anything like it. It spoke to you. *I spoke to you.*”

He wants to beg.

He wants to plead.

He wants to drop to his knees, tear his chest open, and bare himself – his monster – to the scornful light of Will’s judgment.

Doesn’t Will see?

Can’t he see that their monsters are equal forces against which the world might burn? To embrace or tear apart whatever the world may offer them?

We could be beautiful.

He wills Will to see, to hear, to feel the dedication and obsession and desperate, longing hope pouring from him like an open wound.

We, Will, are beautiful.

A sound rips from Will’s throat.

Hannibal’s monster flinches.

Will folds towards the oak floorboards, arching his back with a snarl.

“I had to know you,” Hannibal says. He extends an arm, palm out and towards his trembling boy, even as Will tenses further. “I had to have you. Not just to conquer, not to slay. But to possess. I must. It’s the only way. You’re mine, my beautiful thing, irrevocably. There is nothing left in my world save you.”

Will lunges.

The Sea

Chapter Summary

They fight.

Rated M for Mother-Holy-These-Boys-Are-a-Mess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will's fury is breathtaking.

His body language is clear. His intent is *loud*.

Before the night is through, he will rip Hannibal apart, limb from limb, and bathe in what remains.

Still, Hannibal cannot capitulate. *Refuses* to capitulate, even as Will bares his teeth with the sly surety of a trapped fox. Hannibal's instincts thrash in his gut, a meek warning he's spent the better part of his life ignoring. They warn him that Will intends to attack.

The omega furls into a crouch, the rippling muscles across his back reminding Hannibal of disturbed waters.

Beautiful, he thinks and means it. *The proditor*.

Will is preparing to lunge, and Hannibal is helpless to do anything but open his arms, expecting to catch the immaculate creature as he has so many times before.

The warning buzz of his instincts put their lips to his ear to scream only when Will is close enough for Hannibal to see that capillaries have burst in the sclera of his right eye, coating everything from his cornea to iris in a sweet, melancholy red. Close enough that the steak knife Will had thieved from the restaurant – *the glorious, worshipful creature* - will find easy purchase in Hannibal's flesh.

His instincts save him. But only just.

Hannibal cants back a half-step, right as Will's shoulder blade rises. It's a gesture Hannibal himself has made countless times; a shift in breeze that warns of an encroaching storm. It's the hike of Will's rotator cuff, shoulder held close to his ear, so he can line up his forearm with Hannibal's soft unprotected flesh and *thrust*.

The purr perched in Hannibal's throat finally takes flight, spilling into the room at a volume that's almost obscene. The only evidence Will hears it is a quick, shocked blink.

The shift of Will's shoulder catches Hannibal's attention. The shift of his arm passes Hannibal by completely.

The omega is *luminous*.

Hannibal blinks, blinks again, and for a moment his eyes – both eyes – are clear and seeing and blissfully undamaged. Then comes the blood.

He doesn't need to touch the wound to feel it. It's a swift north-south slash that's sunk deep into his brow and cheek and brings with it a second or two of incapacitating pain. By some miracle, it's missed his eye completely.

The pain hasn't quite begun its retreat when he takes a last, longing look at Will's marred sclera before spinning in a pirouette to the far side of the kitchen island. He grabs one of his cooking knives. The sound of it sliding from its block makes him shudder. The weight of it in his hand feels like God.

Will lunges again, a furious growl gathering spittle at the corners of his mouth.

If Hannibal survives the evening, he thinks he'll take up watercolors again.

Will screams '*monster!*' into the kitchen's cathedral ceiling with a furious, all-consuming cry that makes Hannibal weak at the knees.

He will indeed take up watercolors. Overlooking a gray piazza on the outskirts of an un-noteworthy town in Italy, he'll insist Will lean with the frail, lithe dignity of his gender while Hannibal paints him in reds and chocolates and blues.

Hannibal hisses, "*Omega*," as Will circles around the leather sofa in the study.

"*Alpha*," Will spits back.

Hannibal runs.

It's clear at once that Will hadn't expected him to flee. The scent of Will's mild fear, closer to apprehension than terror, blooms in the study just as Hannibal ducks into the hallway and runs full sprint to the rooms beyond.

Will is no predator. Not in the honest sense, the true sense that Hannibal is. Fleeing prey doesn't push Will's darker instincts to the surface.

And so, for a moment, he pauses.

And Hannibal runs.

* * * * *

Will gives up the fight the moment Hannibal flees.

He's omegan.

He's weak.

He's *tired*.

But more than anything, he's a goddamn, motherfucking hypocrite.

It'd been obligation alone that had initially spurred him. Obligation and duty both that had kept one foot fastidiously in front of the other. His training as a cop, his brief training as a potential FBI agent, all of it mashed together to guide him forward.

Get the bad guy, spare the good guy. Make the world better. Be a net positive. Do good. Be good. Be better, the best, do what no one else can. Succeed.

Succeed, succeed, succeed.

So on and so forth. *Ad nauseum*.

He loses all traction long before he reaches the hallway.

It's easy enough to follow Hannibal's scent – grass and leather and forged steel, rimmed in the hesitant tatters of *delight, terror, worship, enthrall*.

Will breathes it all in and knows they're the scents of *obsession*.

The knife feels heavy in his hand, so he drops it. His knees buckle. He falls like a stone.

Call Jack, is his first thought, though it's as weak a sentiment as he's ever felt. Jack's business card is, even now, in the top drawer of the desk in his den. Provided by Hannibal, along with the two files. The Falls Road Arsonist. The Panty Bandit.

Will's mouth twists. He twists his body, too, until his back is against the wall. He brings his knees to his chest and shivers. *Arrogant*, he thinks with a vehemence that makes him grip his overgrown hair between his fingers. *Arrogant, stupid, shameless alpha*.

The lights call to him. Five lights now, spread evenly across the horizon with a god's deference to order.

Only one dead light remains.

His palms ache.

His body aches.

His heart . . .

Goddammit, he's so close. Only one name is left in the back of his little green book: Mason Verger, written in Will's cramped, childish hand, the address next to it in Matthew's looping

scrawl. One last name. One name. And then Will can give himself to the sea.

After Mason, he can drown.

Will doesn't know how long he stays hunched in the hallway of Hannibal's ostentatious manor. He keeps his head bowed. He tugs at his hair until it hurts. At some point, he must have nodded off, because he comes back to himself with a jerk, his neck aching when he lifts his head.

His eyelids are heavy as he flicks them towards a closed door at the end of the hallway.

Il Mostro.

Will collects himself from the floor with a groan. He leaves the knife where it is.

His instincts are burrowed down in the muck, mouths silent, watching him with wide eyes. They are as weak as he is. He doesn't need them tittering to know what's happening.

He's irreparably, awfully, completely, hatefully, violently, unforgivably in love with Hannibal Lecter.

Will pauses when he enters the storage room. A shadow uncoils from its farthest side.

Will closes his eyes. He slumps against the wall nearest the door and rests his head against it, baring his neck to the room and the creature lurking within. "Remarkable," he breathes. "Beautiful. Masterful."

Somewhere in the room, Hannibal pauses.

"I meant it when I said it, to that reporter," Will continues. His pulse aches in his chest. "I still mean it. But I have unfinished—"

Before Will knows what's happening, he's pinned to the wall. Hannibal has moved silently, *beautifully* across the room, shielding both his scent and intentions until it's too late for Will to stop him.

Hannibal presses his mouth to Will's ear. His voice sounds wet when he says, "Tell me."

"*Il Mostro*," Will breathes back. His fingers itch to claw at Hannibal's back, to cup the alpha's face in his hands, to sob and writhe and scream at the awfulness of it all. The beauty. The horror. The *need*. "The Chesapeake Ripper."

Hannibal's hot breath stalls on Will's cheek.

"For the man in the Baltimore marshlands," Will says and his fingers twitch, eager to do violence and escape. To console and tear. To wreak irreparable damage and soothe. His voice is as wet as Hannibal's when he says, "It really was incredible. You undid blasphemy."

Hannibal relaxes his grip on Will's shoulders. It's enough for Will's hands to spring to Hannibal's back. He balls the fabric of his suit between palms that itch with the need to set

fire to the manor and raze everything to the ground with it, he and Hannibal included.

Water laps at his feet. His instincts skitter from it, seeking dry land.

The water is gathering with stunning speed. By the time Will looks down to where it's just begun to seep into his socks, it's already cresting over his knees, his thighs, and up to the seat of his pants.

It's more than just inky water and the scent of brine that shimmers back at Will. There's an abyss there, too. Will peers into its depth and knows it calls to him the way the single dead light still screams at his little inlet with a high, tinny terror that moves the sea to pound harder against the cliffs.

"Will."

Will looks up. Before he can do anything else, Hannibal's mouth is on his.

Will tries to move his lips to speak, to tell Hannibal about the abyss and the sea that's finally come to swallow him whole. But Hannibal only moves with him, so Will lets himself sink into the feeling of the alpha's ecstasy instead.

Will breathes while he still can. He breathes and he catalogues.

Warm summer rain, a burst of pollen, clean sweat. *Joy, happiness.*

Mentholated water, dark chocolate, lemons and grapefruits and oranges. *Possessive hunger.*

Frothing and tumultuous seas, death, decay. *Harrowing uncertainty bordering on deep, irreparable sadness.*

Tabasco peppers and fire and wood smoke. The need to *control*, to *assert*, to *dominate*.

Will breathes and bucks his hips and almost grins as Hannibal takes his bottom lip between his teeth with a growl and a pressure that's sure to draw blood.

Will leans into pain, just as the sea grips his throat.

He moans into the heat of Hannibal's mouth and arches against where Hannibal's hands are spread across his lower back.

The water rises. It climbs up Will's chin, over his mouth, and lays cool, salt-stained fingers against his cheeks.

He's exhausted.

He's ready.

He's been yearning for the sweet release of salt water to flood his mouth and drag him into its depths for so long now he can barely remember anything that came before it.

If it comes for him now in Hannibal's storage room and before he can take care of Mason, all the better. He's made worse sacrifices. His life has been little *but* sacrifices.

Hannibal's fingers card expertly through his hair. Every molecule of Will's being sighs with collective pleasure at the warmth, the affection, the aching, unrestrained love pouring through the touch. He wants to moan in response and reward Hannibal for his gentleness because the alpha is nearly vibrating with the desire to bring Will to his knees.

Instead, the crux of the matter strikes him with the brutal sincerity of a gunshot.

Will is a *hypocrite*.

He wants to kill Mason – that instinct is still as alive and thrumming under his skin as strongly as it had the moment he'd set fire to Mason's wellhouse. He'd wanted to kill Randall and Nicholas and the other alphas as well. And he'd been right, justified in his personal enactment of death itself because they'd deserved to die.

They'd *deserved* it.

They'd permitted the system to exist as it was. They sought out and paid the *government* to bed omegas in heat for fuck's sake, as though omegas were little more than any other wild animal prized for how well it bred.

Mason still deserves to die, of course he does. As does any other alpha happy to engage in the oppression of omegas.

But if Mason deserves to die, if the other five lights deserved to be switched back on, then Hannibal deserves to die as well.

And that's something Will *won't* do.

He *can't*.

He stands on his inlet. He expects to find what he always finds when he comes here: the thrashing crack of the sea as it pounds mercilessly at the cliffs, a little more of his gray beach eaten by indifferent waters, his precious lights flickering at the horizon's edge.

It's because he's already expecting them that, for a moment, he's not sure what he's seeing.

The five lights are still aglow. The final dead light remains unlit. But every direction Will turns, no matter where he looks, he sees only land. His little inlet is no longer an inlet but an insubstantial mound of crumbling rock and sand whose shards roll without border into more sand and more sand and more sand.

The sea is *gone*.

No.

He spins back to look at the lights only to find that they, too, have vanished.

“No.” Will doesn’t know if he whispers or screams the word. He must have said something aloud, though, because from some impossible, immeasurable distance, he feels Hannibal take a step back.

Will stumbles forward, unsure if he’s chasing the sea or Hannibal’s touch.

Something dark and unwieldy explodes in his chest. The force of it is *incredible* and he knows at once what it is: now that the sea has retreated, the abyss has room to grow.

It feels like a voiding or the absence of air, as though something – *someone* – has carved out massive chunks of his soul and hasn’t bothered to replace what they’d ripped away. He places a hand to his chest with a wince. It *hurts*.

The abyss pulses lazily under his fingers.

Will opens his mouth to speak only for a shrill, omegan whine to pour from his lungs like a leak. “*Hannibal.*”

“I’m here, sweet one. I’m right here.”

With caution, with tenderness, Hannibal rests one of his hands over Will’s, right above the abyss. It pays Hannibal no mind.

Will coughs out a wet, heavy sob.

Hannibal runs the thumb of his free hand under Will’s eyes. “What’s happened, my love? You smell . . .”

He can’t say whether Hannibal is unsure what the scents gathering around Will mean or he’s simply unwilling to say it out loud.

Will doesn’t need him to speak to know what the scents mean.

Conquered.

He smells like he’s been conquered.

He can feel Hannibal’s hesitation as much as he can smell it. It smells like rain.

“It hurts,” Will breathes and suddenly, he is leaning into Hannibal’s touch, desperate for it in a way that he’s sure eclipses any desperation he’s felt before. “The sea . . .”

Hannibal pulls Will in close, bringing his head to his chest and wrapping his arms around him until Will feels nothing but the sheer, blissful weight of Hannibal and smells nothing but leather and grass and forged steel.

Will *screams*.

Hannibal rocks him slowly, soothing him with words in languages Will doesn’t know. It makes no difference; Will is screaming and he’s afraid he’ll never be able to stop.

He screams for his little inlet which is no longer an inlet but a deflated, neglected lump of sand surrounded by mountains that had withstood the fury of the sea.

He screams for the life he'd left alone and abandoned and floating in the middle of the Virginian woodlands.

He screams for his dogs, for his career that'd been severed neatly at the knees, and for Jack-fucking-Crawford who'd had an inkling of the darkness that resides within him but whose blind faith in his abilities had shadowed all else.

He screams for himself, too, and the future – *his* future promise of being swept out to sea – now lost to unforgiving waters.

He clutches at the lapels of Hannibal's jacket and buries his face into scratchy wool. He doesn't know what to do. And because he doesn't know what to do, he does what feels right: he presses himself harder into the warmth of Hannibal's chest. The alpha is still murmuring soft, meaningless noises to the top of his head. Despite himself, Will breathes Hannibal's name with a sweet cry that sounds like the chiming of bells.

Love. Somehow, unbidden, it had blossomed. Against every true, non-omegan instinct he possessed, he's somehow, impossibly fallen in love.

And he wants absolutely nothing to do with it.

Will feels his head bow under the weight of the thought, only for Hannibal to extend one long, aristocratic finger and lift his chin. Neither of them can clearly see the other in the failing light, but still Hannibal's fingers move until he's cupping Will's chin and Will is shivering under the touch.

With a sob, Will summons his instincts to the surface. They jostle against each other, agitated by the gaping void that's found its home so near to the muck. He waits for them to settle with the patience of a man trapped for a millennium in purgatory.

Will pleads with them. *You have to help me.*

After a long moment, during which he can feel Hannibal's eyes boring into him, his instincts calm. They breathe a clean, unwavering sigh across his innards that feels like *home*.

Hannibal's voice is hesitant. "Talk to me." A pause. "Please."

Will's grateful he can hide his grimace in the low light in the storage room. "I need a minute. Can I . . . I need a minute. Just a minute." He can smell Hannibal's hesitancy before he's finished speaking. "Just a minute, I swear. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not running. I'm here, with you, where I . . . where I'm meant to be. Just-*please*."

Hannibal may have nodded. May have smiled or frowned or creased his eyes in response. Will doesn't know. Instead, just as quickly as he'd appeared from the shadows, the alpha immerses himself back again, until Will stands trembling and alone.

Minutes or hours pass before Will settles. Only then does he move. And when he does, all he can think to do is run the fingers of one limp hand down his torso, from clavicle to groin, careful not to press too hard should the brittleness of his new skin begin to crumble.

“I’m so beautiful,” he whispers, a deity among so many others. He straightens his spine, lifts one arm, and curls it to touch his shoulder to stand like a Greek statue. Like a trophy amongst the spoil.

Will is sure if the gilded frames of Hannibal’s painting could speak, if the Samurai suit at the far end of the room could spring to life, they’d agree that they, too, are deities. Jewels extracted from the worthless rubble of mankind and hoarded by a greedy man who’d been broken by the loss of everything he loved at far too young an age.

Deities they are, in the presence of a god who has slain and conquered them all.

* * * * *

Hannibal hides his pleasure when Will comes to him that night.

Will is bundled in the duvet from his own bed. At the edge of Hannibal’s, he drops the heavy fabric to the ground and stands still for a long moment.

Hannibal’s eyes trace the rise and fall of Will’s shoulders (*even, unhurried breaths*), the plateau of his pectoral muscles (*relaxed*), his large hands (*open, calm*) and wonders if anything so beautiful has or ever will exist again.

There are many things he knows with certainty. Now, he knows another: Will Graham is *his*.

Silently, he pulls back the covers and Will furls his beauty inward to slip between the sheets. He moves soundlessly across the bed until he can rest curled against Hannibal’s side. Will says nothing but lifts one hand to touch lightly at the gauze over Hannibal’s brow.

Hannibal takes Will’s hand and presses it to his lips. It smells like copper and charcoal. “It’s fine, beloved. It will heal. And with any luck, it will scar.”

Hannibal looks down at Will, eager to consume whatever Will has made of his words. Will’s eyes are open, electric blue irises fixed at where his hand rests cupped in Hannibal’s. Will’s face is relaxed, almost serene, and there’s a small smile at his mouth.

It’s the smile that makes Hannibal’s blood runs cold. “How are you feeling?”

Will’s smile softens as he closes his eyes and rubs his cheek against Hannibal’s chest. “I’m tired. I didn’t realize how much of the sea I had . . . inside me, I guess, until it was gone. It’s going to take time to get used to.”

Hannibal blinks. “The sea is gone?”

Will pushes his face further into Hannibal’s chest, until his voice is muffled. “Yeah. Left. Retreated. It’s not here anymore. But I don’t want to talk about it right now.” He yawns hugely, covering his open mouth with the flesh of Hannibal’s chest. “Tell me a story?”

Hannibal waits. Only when Will opens his eyes and raises an eyebrow does he speak. “I began drawing as a child. I was in an orphanage at the time.” He dips his nose into the omega’s hair and breathes deeply, coating his tongue and the back of his throat in brazed amber.

What Hannibal doesn’t mention is that he’d begun drawing in the basement of a cold, damp castle deep in a Lithuanian forest, surrounded by the festering smell of other unwashed children.

“One night, in the dead of winter when sleep had not yet taken me, I woke to the sound of chalk against stone.”

Long ago, Hannibal had turned silently on the thin mat in the damp basement and had only just been able to make out the slovenly shape of Augustas. The boy had pilfered a stick of chalk from the ramshackle art room on the third floor. A room that before the war had been a drawing studio that’d belonged to Hannibal’s mother.

Skrek, skrek. The chalk had skipped against the uneven stones of the basement wall, covering the boy’s pillow in a soft dusting of powder. He had a gift, there was no doubt. It existed in the way the drawing matched Hannibal’s pin-straight hair and the wide, deeply bowed line of his mouth.

“His gift was obvious, the way it existed in the proportional lines of my body and legs. Even if they were positioned obscenely to engage in an unspeakable act with one of the less friendly mutts that roamed the grounds.”

Will hums and presses his mouth to Hannibal’s clavicle. Into the skin, he breathes, “What did you do?”

“I redoubled my efforts in art class over the following weeks. Until one night, I was able to leave my own drawing under Augustas’s pillow.”

Unforgivingly fat Augustas who remained fat despite the lean meals available at the orphanage. Whose chins had wobbled awfully when he’d unfolded Hannibal’s gift to reveal a beautifully rendered depiction of his fat frame pinned to a tree like Jesus Christ as crows devoured his eyes.

Will hums again.

“It was an equally obscene drawing, of course. The best any child might offer.” Hannibal pauses. Next to him, Will holds his breath. “It was also the first challenge put to rest.”

The omega has read him *beautifully* since the moment he entered the manor. Hannibal has indeed wanted this, has waited for it. Decades have been spent carefully maintaining and tending to his wealth. Educating himself. Developing all manner of hobbies and interests as he perfected etiquette and social mannerisms. As he lengthened. As he grew. Challenge upon challenge confronted, assessed, and slain.

In France under the lights of the Eiffel Tower, in Italy on the banks of the Rind, with his back pressed against *La Pietà* and a soft, sweet omega beauty between his hands, he had decimated and annihilated and flourished.

Until, all at once, the world lost some of its shine.

“A habit of mine, really, to see a challenge and address it.”

One morning, not so long ago, he’d woken to find his paintings, his harpsichord, his manor looking less like hard won spoils of war and more like the carnage of the conquerable. The pitiable. A lifetime of carcasses stacked like trophies for him alone.

It had been then, in a new world of corpses he’d felled himself, that he’d last homed an omega. He’s a solitary creature by nature and subservience, obedience – all those placid desires of beings he does not understand – they no longer hold room in his skull or at his dining table.

He’d fought and conquered for decades. And then . . . he’d waited – for man or beast, he didn’t know. Someone or something malleable and bright and beautiful to hone now that he was finished honing himself. A thing to share and revel with him in his greatest feats.

A fellow conqueror to walk beside him.

“It’s love then, isn’t it?” Will asks. “This mutually assured destruction.”

Pleasure creates a bubble beside the piano wire in Hannibal’s belly. It grows, nudging aside his organs, until his torso feels pleasantly tight around it. He inhales and the feeling bursts, ricocheting off his veins and seeping into his sinew.

Will loves him. And he’s no longer at risk of losing Will to the sea.

Yes, decades have certainly been lost to his search for companionship. Companionship he now knows bears the precise shape of Will’s upper lip when he sneers.

He gathers Will closer, tracing the curve of his ribs. How *easily* the bones will crack if he digs a finger between them. “No, my sweet boy. This is the founding of man. This is the creation of the heavens and cosmos alike. Of beasts that have, do, and may soon walk amongst us. This is clay ripped from the soil and molded to exaltation. This is us, Will, you and me alone, standing alongside God. Not as virginal sycophants untested by their master but as equals. This is locust plagues and divine miracles and the weeping Madonna. This, my heart, this is the world as it’s meant to be.”

Will’s eyes are closed, his chin raised up and away from Hannibal. “What if I don’t believe in God?”

“It matters not. For I believe in you.”

With a finger, Hannibal turns Will’s face toward him. The eyes that look back are shadowed in the low light and heavy with tears. Their kiss tastes of salt. For a moment, the omega’s mouth fails to move under Hannibal’s. With it, a hint of dread begins to pool at the base of

his spine until, with an almighty cry, Will rolls on top of him and digs his fingernails into Hannibal's shoulders.

Will's lips find his ear, "I want you. I need you, right now. *Please.*"

"Will--"

"*Alpha.*"

Hannibal's breath catches. The word skewers through him, puncturing his throat and lungs and burying deep into his vertebrae. He gives in to the feeling by running his hands down Will's spine to feel the tight dip of his lower back. Need pools viciously in his groin.

Hannibal moves his hands to Will's face. He places one palm against the omega's cheek, petting Will's hair with the other. Will leans into the touch with a soft keen that almost makes Hannibal smile.

Hannibal says, "I need you to look at me."

It takes a long moment for Will to obey. Hannibal continues to run his fingers through the omega's hair, humming softly. Slowly, Will's brow unfurrows and the tension at his mouth eases.

"This isn't rejection," Hannibal says. He keeps his grip firm as Will's eyes flash, afraid the omega might pull away. "I'm certain I have never wanted anything so much and for as long as I've wanted you to come to me just as you are now."

Will's neck tenses. His eyes cut to Hannibal's mouth. He tries to lean in, but Hannibal holds him back.

"I want you, Will. Completely. In ways that are as foreign to me as they are thrilling. But much has happened tonight." He runs his thumb against Will's cheek to gather fresh tears. "I'm concerned you're mistaking lust with your instinctual need for protection, now that the sea is gone. You have, until this moment, shown a rather singular aversion to physical intimacy."

Will's responding smile is small and watery but blindingly bright. "I love you."

Hannibal must close his eyes, fearful that if he continues to look at the omega – *his omega, his, his, his* - he'll come apart at the seams. His instincts are in tumult, seething at his refusal to bend Will over *now, Hannibal, right now*, yet ecstatic at the omega's words.

"I do," Will continues. He presses his hands to Hannibal's chest, one on top of the other right over his heart. "I know I do. I want this. I want you, Hannibal. I see the darkness in you. The hurt and the loss and the desire to inflict even a little of it back on the world. It's stunning. I'm *stunned* by you. I want to . . . to swallow it all myself. Eat it out of you. I--"

Hannibal comes alive with a shudder. He flips them until Will is facedown on the bed, pinned squarely to the mattress below. He slides himself slowly up Will's back. His cock aches between his legs, wetting both his boxers and Will's – *his* – silk pajama pants.

Hannibal leans back with a low growl to grasp at the elastic of his own undergarments. He pulls them down without ceremony, tilting his weight from one knee and then the other until he can kick them to the ground.

Below him, Will is attempting to do the same with frenetic speed and a high, churlish whine that whips through Hannibal's gut like an arrow.

Hannibal sits back so he can consume the sight of Will struggling to strip for him. He lasts as long as it takes Will to push the pants down to his knees before Hannibal is on him again, fitting himself neatly between the seam of Will's cheeks with another low growl. Will whines a single, high note that feels like it's blistering Hannibal's very soul.

To the shell of Will's ear, he whispers, "Are you certain this is what you want?"

The pendulum swings. The scent of hot ash is alive in the air.

"Oh, my fucking god, what are you waiting for? *Take me already.*"

Hannibal's smile feels more like he's baring his teeth. "With pleasure, darling." He takes the upper curve of Will's ear between his teeth and bites.

Will moans furiously. The arch in his lower back, already so deep, so beautifully, *achingly* deep, dips further until Hannibal feels compelled to rest his hand against it.

"You are perfection, little one. Look how well you move for me." Hannibal presses his teeth lightly against Will's shoulder and splays his hand across Will's hole. Will is already so wet that Hannibal dips one, two, three fingers inside, groaning against Will's skin as the omega accepts his fingers with nothing more than a small grunt.

"I am a man of visual and tactile sensibilities," Hannibal says. He bows his head so he can watch his fingers slowly twisting inside Will, coating them in slick. "A curator of the fine and the treasured. Those things aching with beauty, whether fully tapped or still on offer."

"*God-fucking-damnit-*"

"My world, the very cornerstones of my soul, are equal parts strong moorings and decimation. Structure and viscera." Hannibal scissors his fingers and Will shudders. His hole pulses delicately. "Don't you dare come."

Will moans another piercing cry that forces Hannibal to close his eyes. When he opens them, the omega's hands are twisted tight into the sheets above his head, his face buried between them.

Hannibal withdraws his fingers and coats himself with slick. He lines himself with Will's opening with something closer to frenzy than the rapture this moment deserves. His other hand presses gently on Will's lower back, forcing the omega to bend further into a breeding lordosis before returning to grip Will's hip hard enough to bruise. "My little corner of the earth is interspersed with nods to the countless masters of the past. Those who have created

beauty and razed kingdoms and who have forged paths for me to follow or discard as I see fit.”

Hannibal tips his fingers so his nails dig into Will’s hip. The omega lets out a hiccupping cry, though he leans into the pressure. Arousal floods Hannibal’s veins. Only when the white crescents of his nails fill with blood does he push himself inside the omega in a single, long thrust.

Will’s legs give out. Hannibal catches himself on his hands before he can crash into the omega. He dips his head until his forehead rests on the damp crevice between Will’s tight shoulder blades. To his pleasure, he finds he must remain still for a moment, overwhelmed, utterly overwhelmed by heat and slick and sensation.

With his mouth open and pressed lightly between Will’s shoulder blades, he thrusts.

Will cries out. He grabs at one of the pillows above his head and pulls himself closer to the headboard.

Hannibal hesitates. “Will-“

Will turns his head just enough for Hannibal to see he’s sneering. “I swear to god, if you ask me again whether I want this, I’ll scream. We need this. You need this and I need this and *just-just fuck me like you mean it.*”

And then, as if to prove his point, Will thrusts himself back on Hannibal’s cock to the root.

“*Omega*,” Hannibal groans. He allows his body to collapse on top of Will. From this angle he can bury himself further inside the tight wet heat and does just that, reveling in the way the omega squirms back to meet him.

All at once, Hannibal is drowning. He’s consumed by the need to ravenously consume the omega, cut him open stem to sternum, feast on the wet thud of his heart, cook his liver or, better yet, eat it raw, mince Will’s tongue and kiss Will hard while the remnants remain between his teeth.

“Oh, my god. Oh, god, Hannibal, *please*-“

Hannibal thrusts again, just once, and feels Will’s entire body contract. Will makes a sound closer to pain than pleasure and that might have been terror for the way he throws his head back and grips the bedspread with enough pressure to tear as he comes with a violence Hannibal can feel.

Hannibal withdraws enough to feel the cool air of the room. A tingling pressure at the base of his cock warns him his knot is swelling. He waits a moment longer, long enough for Will to untangle his fingers from the sheets, before he begins to move in earnest.

To the bounce of chocolate curls and the low, weak moans slipping from Will like prayers, Hannibal says, “My universe is equal parts bones and kintsugi and *War Pieta*. Terror and love. Ripping and rending. Swans and typhoid.”

His orgasm takes him with the force of a freight train. He feels the crest start behind his bellybutton, plucking at the piano wire as it crashes into his abdominal walls. It drowns out all sound, blocks out all light. Contracts the sun and the moon and stars, oxygen and carbon and air, to the single point of Will's oppressively hot hole, wet and obscene and blisteringly, perfectly *his*. He pushes hard, once, and feels the bone-deep serenity of his knot catching on Will's rim before with a soft pop it's buried deeply in the omega's flesh.

Sweat seeps in through the edges of the bandage over his eye. The salt burn is exquisite. The knowledge that he will forever be marred and marked by Will Graham, *his omega*, a pleasure against which he has nothing to measure.

He loses himself to the feeling for seconds at a time. And even when he comes back to the present, even when his dick is aching with overstimulation and he continues to move, desperate to keep the feeling alive, he knows there is nowhere else he'd rather be.

Eventually, he does stop. He lowers himself slowly to rest on Will's back. He pulls back a little, just enough to feel the tight hold of Will against his knot.

He says, "Or, at least, that had been my world. Now, there is you, Will. And there is us. And together, we are *everything*."

Will says nothing, though he offers no protest.

Hannibal moves his head until his chin rests against one of Will's shoulders. He buries his nose into soft curls, now damp and heated with sweat. He takes the tip of Will's ear between his teeth.

Will leans his head into the feeling, baring one long side of his neck.

It may have been no more than instinct. Or it may have been the unbearable pleasure of his knot plugging the omega – *his omega, his, his, his* – so completely. Hannibal isn't sure. Whatever the cause, one moment he's appreciating the lean slope of Will's neck and in the next his mouth is open and his teeth are pressed to its lowest point.

Pain laces white hot across his face. He rears back with a grunt. The gauze bandage is balled tight in Will's fist. The rest of Will's body is vibrating beneath him.

A streak of lightning crashes across the room. Will's head is turned enough for Hannibal to see one electric blue eye, its pupil blown wide.

The air grows heavy and damp with an approaching storm. A magenta hibiscus blossoms from the headboard.

The cold dread is back in Hannibal's spine. "My apologies," he says. "I forgot myself for a moment. Here . . ."

He gently uncurls Will's fingers to remove the bandage which he places on the nightstand. He caves to the suggestion from his instincts that he avoid catching Will's eye. Instead, he pulls

one of the omega's shoulders back enough to wrap his arm across Will's chest, tilting them both back so they're on their sides.

A few drops of rain patter softly against his exposed thigh. Goosebumps riot where they land. Still, Will adjusts himself so he's pressed snugly back against Hannibal's chest. One of Hannibal's arms is cradling Will's head and the omega takes Hannibal's hand to press his fingers softly to his mouth. Will brings both of their hands to his chest. Within seconds, he's snoring softly.

Hannibal remains awake for hours. Long after his knot deflates. Long after he rolls to face the far wall. Even after Will chases his touch a few moments later to round his sweating heft around Hannibal's back, sleep evades him.

It's only when Will begins to purr that Hannibal closes his eyes. He sleeps fitfully.

Chapter End Notes

War Pieta: <http://www.renegadetribe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/War-Pieta-800x445.png>

Conquered

Chapter Summary

Frederick comes for Will.

Will wakes alone. For a long time, he doesn't move.

He listens to his breathing instead; focuses on the whisper-quiet touch of his eyelashes against his cheeks and the hollow, distant labor of his heart. With something closer to apathy than he's felt since presenting, he turns like a cat to stretch against the silk and feather down of the bed.

The room is mostly dark. What slivers of daylight bleed around the edges of the blinds lose purchase in the air long before they can infect the room.

He breathes. He breathes and refuses to do more.

It must be the bed that's allowing him to experience as simple a pleasure as merely existing. The light. The way the sheets slide like chilled liquid against his skin instead of gathering at his knees and elbows in sweat-soaked bunches like the institute's coveralls.

It's all of it, all of it combined. And for a while, it's enough.

Chesapeake Ripper.

He flinches and then groans as pain points erupt in a half dozen places from his neck to his inner thigh.

The sea is gone.

It's only when the abyss at his chest pulses once, almost lazily, that he finally summons the will to get out of the bed.

He moves into the walk-in closet to stand naked before the full-length mirror within. He hadn't bothered to turn on any lights, though once he's inside and surrounded by the textures and sight and – Jesus Christ – the sheer *scent* of Hannibal, he sees hadn't needed to. His reflection against the murky light of the room behind him highlights what he came in there to see: fingertip-sized bruises splattered across his hips and neck.

He touches each one as he finds them. After a time, once he's sure he's found them all, he counts. Thirty-five. Thirty-five individual times Hannibal touched his skin with the reverence one might feel when touching a sacred artifact, combined with just enough pressure to ensure his mark would remain.

Will grits his teeth.

He feels hollow.

He feels detached.

He feels like a being in limbo, caught somewhere between the ecstasy of giving himself, his *omeganness*, so completely to an alpha . . . and the image of him standing in the storage room, one hand up and curled toward his bicep like a Greek statue.

Conquered.

The mirror reflects his sneer and the shamed flush at his cheeks back to him.

It's with a mix of mild surprise and resignation that he realizes the thoughts of what he'd - *they'd* - done the night before doesn't send him into a spiral of self-loathing. He'd wanted Hannibal, simply and purely. More than that, he'd wanted to give Hannibal the one thing he'd kept from all other alphas since first presenting - himself. Naked, bare, open, willingly. Completely.

That desire may have been a thank you, for Hannibal has in many ways treated him as so much more than his gender. But standing here before the full-length mirror, a relic in so much the same way as the suit of armor and the other trinkets kept safely in Hannibal's storage room, he knows the truth.

Hannibal has conquered him.

Despite knowing better. Despite the months he'd spent refusing to heed his instincts. Despite the lifetime of petty aversions he's felt in the presence of sweet, simpering omegas and doting alphas. Despite the shame that is already finding purchase in his chest near the abyss, he's fallen completely and irreparably in love with an alpha. And the knowledge eats at him like a living virus.

So, okay, yes, he's been conquered. So be it. But he won't be slayed by anything other than unforgiving waters.

And if the sea no longer wants him, he refuses to be consumed by anything else.

He leaves the closet and then the bedroom but stops at the top of the third-floor stairwell to inhale. The leather, grass, and steel-forged scent of Hannibal is present but faded. The alpha isn't home.

It's only when he opens the door to his bedroom that he finally pinpoints what feels so *off*. The sun is directly outside the bay window by the bed. The room is warm and alive. Yet, it seems almost dulled, as though some nefarious creature had snuck in during the night to suck the brightest colors out from everything around him.

He shakes his head to clear it. Ignoring the closed door to his den, he fumbles through the boxes of clothing in his closet that he still hasn't gotten around to opening until he finds the backpack he'd used for the omegan hotel.

He begins to pack.

* * * * *

Restless unease follows Hannibal throughout the day. By the time he's escorted his last patient to the waiting room, mirroring her small, sad smile as she snuffles into a handful of tissues, he's *spent*.

The midafternoon light bathes his office in a pleasant golden hue despite the temperature outside. He checks his watch. There's at least an hour before he'll need to return home and there is much to do. But first, he grabs a tumbler from the standing cabinet in his office and pours a generous helping of whiskey.

He gets to work.

The first call is to his contact in Italy, to secure new identification cards for Will. While his beautiful boy may not yet be interested in bonding with him, the time will eventually come when he is. And Hannibal would much prefer being surrounded by the gray-and-stone beauty of Florence when it does.

The call connects quickly enough. While he's on hold, he opens his laptop and brings up the site for his preferred art supplier in Florence. He slips easily into Italian, one of his eyes on a dashing set of watercolor paints, when a brusque man answers the call. He purchases the set as well as paintbrushes, canvases, and turpentine and directs them all to be mailed to his apartment in San Niccolò.

His contact promises to deliver a doctored passport, United States driver's license, and social security card to Hannibal within a week of Hannibal sending half the cost as well as a photograph of Will's current identification card. Hannibal's responding, "*Grazie*," is sincere.

His second call is to the haberdasher. He orders an obscene assortment of ties, suits, casualwear, undergarments, socks, and shoes in the omega's size, both in menswear and with omegan stylings. When he finishes rattling off the list, the beta inhales quickly, his only show of pleasure at the sheer size of the order. Hannibal ends the call after reassurances from the man that the pieces will be delivered to him within a fortnight.

He's perusing a site of omegan nesting materials when he hears a knock at his office door. He eyes the small clock on his desk with a frown.

Frederick Chilton stands at the threshold between the waiting room and the office proper, his overcoat hanging over hands cupped in front of his pelvis. He brings with him the scents of decayed snow and the tangy bitterness of sweat.

The way he fidgets makes Hannibal think of the rodent under the chestnut tree outside his office.

"Frederick." Hannibal steps aside and gestures into his office with a tip of the tumbler. "Did we have an appointment?"

“No, no, nothing of the sort.”

“Then to what do I owe the pleasure?”

On the far side of Hannibal’s desk, Frederick flips his wrist in a sort of arrested motion that dissolves into a shrug. “I – we must discuss Will Graham.”

“Must we?”

“Yes, of course. I-“ Frederick begins but stops as he scans Hannibal’s office.

Hannibal follows his gaze. He notes the towering bookshelves at the mezzanine level, the artwork framed with intentional precision, the desk positioned a quarter-length into the room, and the lack of diplomas or degrees in their mismatched craft-store frames.

Frederick straightens his back. “I understand Mr. Graham recently went into heat.”

“He did.” Hannibal sits behind his desk and gestures vaguely before it. “As is expected of his gender.”

Frederick eyes the available seating: one black leather armchair facing another, the blue daybed and a few single chairs perched neatly against a blood-red wall. He remains standing. “Yes. But what is decidedly *unexpected* is the apparent ruckus he caused at the omegan hotel you deposited him at. I understand it took no less than *six armed guards* to gentle him into submission.”

“That is incorrect.”

“Indeed,” Frederick snaps. His eyes still skirt the room. “Relayed to me by a little bird who had to go to the emergency room to tend to the wounds inflicted by your wayward omega.”

Hannibal leans forward to place the tumbler on his desk. He does not let it go. “Wounds otherwise dismissed in the confines of your institute as Mr. Graham’s natural inclinations. Matthew has seen Will through other heats.”

Frederick’s gaze settles on the gauze bandage across Hannibal’s eye. “I see you, too, failed to escape Mr. Graham’s wrath.” When Hannibal remains silent, Frederick snaps, “Oh, Hannibal, be reasonable. Matthew was *attacked*.” Though Hannibal still hasn’t moved to respond, Frederick holds up a hand, tented under the weight of his overcoat. “There’s simply no other word for it. Mr. Graham attacked him, repeatedly. *Brutally*. This isn’t behavior the institute can abide, of course it’s not. I cannot imagine the suffering Matthew-“

“The suffering he understood and appreciated as the natural inclinations of this particular omega. As I’ve already said and as you are already aware.” One cut edge of the tumbler digs into Hannibal’s thumb. He grips it harder. “Which, I imagine, is precisely why he attempted to contact me before reaching out to you. Even a man as simple as your orderly recognized-“

“Yes, and where *were* you, exactly?” Frederick’s gaze resumes roaming the office restlessly. “Did you believe you could simply drop Will off at some omegan hotel and insist he traverse his heat alone, without the benefit-“

“How, precisely, do you imagine Matthew knew where-”

“And then you disappeared! *You disappeared*. As the homing alpha, it is your responsibility alone to tend to a homed omega during his heat. You know this. And you *failed*.”

There is blood pounding behind Hannibal’s eyes. With considerable effort, he relaxes back into his chair and temples his fingers over his crossed knees. “Certainly you didn’t drive all this way simply to admonish me.”

It’s only when the beta, puffed and swollen with his false indignancy, fails to be punctured by Hannibal’s words that Hannibal stands from behind his desk. The unease that has uncoiled in increments since he awoke now refurls to lodge itself hard in chest. “Frederick, what have you done?”

Frederick speaks in a monotone, his eyes somewhere to the left of Hannibal’s shoulder. “Dr. Lecter, your decision to abandon a homed omega during his heat coupled with what can only be described as an *egregious* lapse of judgment when you sent a beta – outside the oversight of trained medical personnel – in your stead has left me to conclude that you may be unfit to handle the responsibility of homing Mr. Graham.” The beta blinks slowly. “It is with regret that I must inform you that pursuant to subsections 22-b and c of the Omegan Welfare Protection Act, I am suspending your ability to home an omega until further notice. As such, and until the welfare office has an opportunity to review your case, the care of Mr. Graham will be transferred to a halfway house capable of appropriately tending to his needs. The present timeline for review is between six and eight weeks, although-”

There is a low, quiet hum at the base of Hannibal’s skull. “I beg your pardon?”

Frederick takes a step back. One hand is raised below his coat. “Now, now, let’s not lend ourselves to hysteria. I can certainly appreciate-“

“Who did you sell him to?”

“Sell!” The tension in Frederick’s shoulders dips a little. The look he gives Hannibal might have been condescending had the beta’s chin not trembled. “Sell. My goodness, Hannibal, really. Of course I didn’t sell Mr. Graham. Dr. Gideon oversees a perfectly-“

Before either of them can react, Hannibal is before Frederick, a scalpel tucked in his hand, his mouth a hair’s breadth from the beta’s ear. His fingers tighten around the sleek instrument, ringing with the desire to *smash*, to *slice*, to *eviscerate*. “You sold him. To Abel Gideon.”

Frederick’s exhale is shaky. “My God, certainly you cannot-Dr. Gideon is a respected member-“

“He’s a collector.”

“*Really, that’s quite enough*.” Frederick takes a hasty step back and circles Hannibal until the desk is between them. “You alphas are all alike, aren’t you? Believing omegas *belong* to you. A possession you can freely exert your dominance over, like you try to exert dominance over everyone else. It would be an utter disgrace if it wasn’t government sanctioned.”

The dread lacing up Hannibal's spine freezes. He cracks his neck and the ice splinters, ricocheting off his veins and pooling, dangerous and feral, in his gut. The piano wire vibrates. He slips the scalpel into his pocket, his hand cupped around it.

His instincts offer Frederick's name alongside Jack's as his next kill. Hannibal bares his teeth. Before he and Will leave for Italy, the beta will be gutted, blinded, his tongue and fingers removed, and they will eat *well*.

Frederick lifts the edge of his jacket to reveal a brown envelope which he tosses onto Hannibal's desk. The damp press of Frederick's fingers has darkened the paper. Hannibal stares at the small, circle-like creases until he can no longer distinguish them from the pawprints laid into the snow outside his office window.

"All the paperwork I gave the welfare office is here. You can appeal the final decision to the courts, should you find it necessary." Frederick nods at the envelope as he dons his coat and turns to the waiting room door. With his back to Hannibal, he checks his watch. "You have a little over two hours, until seven-o'clock sharp to inform Mr. Graham of the arrangement and ensure his belongings are accounted for. The institute will send a van to collect him."

Frederick opens the door.

"Before you go," Hannibal says, aiming his words at Frederick's soft white underbelly. He permits a little of the anger he feels to bleed into his tone. "I suspect that Dr. Gideon may be the only thing keeping you afloat. How far, exactly, would I have to dig to find a letter of recommendation amongst the rubble that makes you so eminently unqualified for your position?" He smiles, a gesture that's an echo of an echo, for all he can see is Will, bound and thrust into the back of a white box van, curls bouncing as the vehicle moves. "Dr. Gideon alone keeps you in your position, does he not? And in your self-congratulation, you have failed to consider the detritus that surrounds and may ultimately sink you."

He takes a step towards the beta who stands, equal parts trembling and furious, at the door to his office.

"The tides are rising, Frederick. Let's see how well you swim."

* * * * *

Will has almost everything he needs.

He's stuffed the backpack with food, clothing, his identification card, and his copy of *The Bountiful Duty*. The cell phone from Matthew is lying next to the bag on the kitchen island.

He presses a hand to his chest. The initial, blinding pain of the abyss that rose in the sea's retreat has not subsided, not truly, though it's dulled a little on its outermost edges. He leans over the stainless-steel countertop, squeezing his eyes shut and balling the fabric of his shirt into his palm.

Will knows what love feels like. Christ, he's spent his entire fucking life trying and failing not to get sucked into the heady roil of other peoples' feelings – love or otherwise.

A small, traitorous instinct unburies itself from the muck to suggest tentatively that it's for that very reason he's been able to exist in Hannibal's orbit for so long. The man is a battened-down, buttoned-up, walking, talking, breathing imago of near-emotionlessness.

"Because he's a *psychopath*."

The shudder of a shrug rolls across the instinct. *You've never felt more yourself than when you're with him. Your head, your feelings, they're only yours in his company.*

"They're even more mine when I'm alone."

Yes, he knows something about love. He'd loved his dogs, his father, had even thought, many years ago, that he loved one or two ex-girlfriends. He may have – might still – love Alana in some small, withering way.

But *this*? This awful, terrible thing he feels for Hannibal that's blistering the very underpinnings of his skin? It's a monstrous thing. A feral, ugly, all-enveloping heaviness that is eating him alive from the inside out and he wants *nothing* to do with it.

Not now that Hannibal has conquered him.

His hand hovers over the cell phone, the sudden need to text Matthew momentarily stripping him of all other thought.

The doorbell rings. Will whips his head toward the front door so fast a vertebra pops.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

He doesn't have the first fucking clue who might want to visit Hannibal right now, but it doesn't matter; he has no intention of answering the door. He checks the time on the stove. 5:03 p.m. Hannibal will be home any minute. He needs to be out of the manor and two blocks away *now*. He'll find a spot where he can huddle down in the cold and wait for Matthew to pick him up.

The tracking chip.

"*Shit*," he says aloud.

His fingers flutter over the abused leather feel of the skin behind his ear. He eyes the knife block next to the stove. Decision made, he takes a step towards it before freezing in place.

Three knocks land on the front door like cannon blasts. Wildly, impossibly, he feels the vibration batter the inside his skull as he grabs a knife and heads to the bathroom.

He knows that knock – it's the knock of authority, possibly the police. Will closes his eyes to steady himself. Or the FBI.

In the bathroom, he opens one drawer and then another, scrambling at the contents of each until he finds a small hand mirror. He turns his back to the mirror above the sink and raises the hand mirror so he can see the tattoo behind his hear.

Fucking hell, this is going to hurt. He leans back against the sink to steady his legs. Just as the knife slips under his skin and pain tears through him, he feels the rumbling of the garage door opening.

Panic chases the pain through his chest, and for a long moment, it almost blinds him. He throws the knife and hand mirror into a drawer and sprints back to the kitchen for his backpack. He manages to sling it over his shoulder and pocket the cell phone before the door from the laundry room to the garage opens.

He grips the edge of the kitchen island.

“Will. Are you going somewhere?”

It’s Jack. *Of course* it’s fucking Jack.

Furious, spiteful tears gather behind Will’s closed eyelids. *He’d been so close.* . . .

He doesn’t turn around, couldn’t have summoned the willpower even if he’d wanted to, but it’s Hannibal who responds.

“Indeed we are, Jack. A long weekend in upstate New York, to be exact. I hope our plans won’t be waylaid by what has brought you here.”

Jack grunts. Behind him, Will hears the alpha’s heavy footsteps as he approaches the island. Will’s head is still bowed, his fingers still gripping the steel countertop as though it’s the only thing tethering him to the earth.

“Oh, Will, you’re bleeding.”

Alana.

The terror squeezing his heart like a vice eases a little. There’s little reason for Alana to be present if Jack intends on arresting him. Or Hannibal.

The thought is enough for Will to force himself out of his hunched position and drop the backpack to the floor. It takes another few seconds before he gathers enough courage to turn around and another still before he can open his eyes. When he does, he wishes he hadn’t.

Hannibal is standing stock still by the laundry room door. His face is a mask of calm serenity, except for his eyes, which are glittering with a deep, visceral emotion Will can’t identify but which is coating the alpha like a second skin. Will inhales through his mouth.

This. This right here, this very moment in which Will’s actions will puncture Hannibal to his very core is why he needed to be *gone* before Hannibal returned home. He could have lived with the knowledge of Hannibal’s pain caused by his sudden departure and kept himself far away despite it. He’s much less certain he can leave once he experiences the pain himself.

His instincts are wide-eyed but silent. For the second time in as many days, Will reaches out to them. *Help me.*

In unison, they breathe, *Alpha*.

“*Alpha*,” Will says. And, before he can stop himself, he rushes Hannibal.

Hannibal’s eyes widen just as Will careens into him. Neatly, effortlessly, Hannibal’s arms wrap around him, his hands pressed to the small of Will’s back. At once, the room is full of scents – calla lilies, spearmint, salt, and smoke – *surprise* and *tenderness* from Alana and a sort of second-hand embarrassment from Jack. Only Hannibal’s feelings remain elusive, even as he presses his fingers with something near affection into Will’s skin.

Will buries his head into Hannibal neck and breathes deeply. Hannibal skims his fingers behind Will’s ear, gathering the tacky, semi-wet blood drying there.

“You do appear to be injured, my dear. I’d prefer to take a look before we speak with Jack and Alana.” Hannibal raises his voice a little. “A moment, please. We will be brief.”

With his head buried in Hannibal’s skin and the scent of the alpha invading his mouth and nose like a tangible thing, Will couldn’t say what either Jack or Alana made of Hannibal’s words. It must have been something like acquiescence, though, because he hears no protests as Hannibal moves them down the hallway and towards the bathroom.

With a pang that makes him grunt, the abyss behind his breastbone opens its maw a little wider. With it comes a deep, bone-numbing directive to keep his hands on Hannibal, on *his* alpha.

“Alpha,” he whispers, pawing at the back of Hannibal’s coat. “Alpha, *please*.”

“Look at me.”

The coolness in Hannibal’s tone makes him flinch. Long, tense seconds elapse before, with a gentleness Will doesn’t deserve and which doesn’t match the chill in Hannibal’s voice, Hannibal unwinds Will’s arms from around him and takes a step back.

Blinded by tears, Will looks back.

Hannibal doesn’t speak, but Will can feel his eyes slowly moving across Will, from the blood that has dried in a thin rivulet down the side of his neck, to his clothing, jacket and shoes already on, before stopping on his limp, trembling hands.

“Hannibal-“ Will starts but pauses. He’s searching his mind for words of placation, calm, deference, but his brain isn’t working and his chest *hurts*.

“Let me see your ear.”

Will turns his head, blinking to dislodge the gathered tears. Hannibal’s fingers are gentle as he brushes away the hair behind Will’s ear. It takes concerted effort for Will not to lean into the touch.

“The wound has already clotted and appears to be shallow enough. A knife?”

Will nods.

“To dislodge the homing device?”

Will closes his eyes and nods again.

“Why?”

Will’s eyes flash to Hannibal. He forces his mouth to curl into a sneer despite the quiver at his chin and the overwhelming, all-consuming *need* he feels to dive back into Hannibal’s chest.

“No,” Hannibal says suddenly, *coldly*. “You smell of fear. You packed a bag. The truth, Will, as we’re running out of time.”

“Running out of-“

“*Now*.”

Will flinches away just as Hannibal swallows.

It’s the swallow that gives him away. Hannibal’s face is blank. He smells of nothing. But the swallow, that small, delicate sign of uncertainty, sends Will over the edge.

He lies.

“You *left*, Hannibal. After everything that happened last night. Lydia and us fighting, the-the sex. The sea-“ Will cuts himself off to swallow back fresh tears. He gestures at the bandage covering Hannibal’s eye with an incredulous hand. “I *knifed* you. I cut you *with a knife*. I mean, Jesus Christ, my entire world – *our* entire world – tilted on its axis last night and I am a fucking mess right now. I was a fucking mess last night, I was a mess this morning, and I’m still a mess. And you . . . you what? Had patients to see? Some errands to run? Mother of god, if there was *ever* a moment to put what you wanted aside for once.” Will stops to catch his breath. He spreads his hands out between them, palms down, and makes a show of calming himself. “I just needed some time alone. To sort through things, maybe in some place that didn’t smell so damn much like you.” He touches the dried blood behind his ear. “And . . . I didn’t want you to follow me. I wasn’t thinking.”

Hannibal looks *besotted*. Will feels a flare of furious heat in his palms a second before Hannibal is on him, his hands to either side of Will’s face, and his mouth pressed firmly, *worshipfully* to his own.

All at once, Will gives in.

Alpha.

Despite himself, despite the terror still licking at his skin and the abyss that shrinks at Hannibal’s touch, his instincts are elated. He sinks into their rapture as Hannibal pulls away to find and wet a spare cloth. Will keeps his eyes locked on the alpha’s while Hannibal tenderly cleans the blood behind his ear.

“There,” Hannibal says with a final pat. The skin around his eyes crinkle. “All better.”

Slowly, far too aware of the traitorous roil churning in his stomach, Will bows his head until his crown rests against Hannibal’s chest. Hannibal embraces him warmly, drawing them together until Will is cocooned securely between the alpha’s arms.

Will inhales.

Home.

From some distance, he feels Hannibal shuffle him until he’s pressed against Hannibal’s side. They move down the hallway and back to the kitchen.

“*Alpha*,” Will breathes into Hannibal’s neck once Jack and Alana are in earshot. He noses down Hannibal’s clavicle until he feels the steady beat of Hannibal’s jugular. He presses his closed lips to it and stills.

Behind him, Alana release a quiet noise of surprise. Jack clears his throat. Hannibal’s large, strong palm and warm fingers touch Will’s face. He doesn’t bother to suppress a purr.

“I’m glad you’ve rejoined us-“ Jack begins but stops when Hannibal growls.

“Alpha.” Will says it once, twice, three times, until the fingers against Will’s face are petting through his hair and Hannibal’s chin is resting on the top of his head.

Alana exhales sharply.

Will is loose and boneless, thrown into a placid stream by Hannibal’s hands, the forged burn of leather and metal and grass, the dark crevasse that cocoons him, the pleasure radiating from his instincts. He whines softly. Hannibal tightens his grip.

Hannibal says, “Please, Jack, let us continue our conversation.”

From under Hannibal’s arm, Will sees Jack pull a red-rope folder from under his overcoat. He places it on the counter, one of his dark, beefy hands spread atop it. The label says: FRA No. 3.

Jack opens the folder and pulls out a document. He lays it flat against the kitchen island and passes it towards Will.

It’s a standard fill-in-the-blank court document titled *Temporary Transfer Order – Omegan Halfway House*. Below the title are the names of Will, Hannibal, and Abel Gideon. It’s signed by Chilton. In the top right corner is an electronic stamp that reveals the date and hour the document was approved by the court.

Somewhere far away from this moment, so far Will almost misses it, klaxons sound in his head. It’s drowned out almost at once by his instincts.

See how easy this is? You were meant to submit.

“I’m surprised you have possession of this,” Hannibal says. His tone might have been cool had the scent of vinegar and peppers – *distaste* - not followed the words. His grip tightens further around Will’s waist. “Dr. Chilton himself informed me of its existence less than an hour ago.”

Interest stirs lazily in Will’s gut, blocking out the sound of the bells. His instincts do not respond to it, though, so neither does he.

He feels more than hears Hannibal’s responding hum. “Are you keeping an eye on Dr. Gideon, Dr. Chilton, or me?”

“Gideon,” Jack says. And then, as though Will isn’t present, he continues, “Will’s reaction to Gideon at the FRA crime scene got me curious. I did some poking around, subpoenaed some financial records from the institute. I won’t bore you with the details, but what we found was, well, it was alarming.”

“Oh?”

“Yep. The long and short of it is that we found some funds deposited by Gideon’s personal bank account into the account for a holding company which lists Chilton as its registered agent. A holding company which doesn’t have a single effing subsidiary to speak of. At first glance, the deposits seem to happen at random intervals, until-“

The pieces are slotting together slowly. There’s a thin film coating the world around Will and he’s not entirely sure whether he’s imagining it or not when he says, “Until you compared them with the dates of some of the Temporary Transfer Orders signed by Chilton.”

“Yep,” Jack says, popping the last letter. “That’s the gambit.”

From under Hannibal’s arm, Will glances at Alana. Her eyes and nose are red and at Jack’s words, her face collapses.

Will turns away and speaks to the myriad of scents she feeds him from the other side of the kitchen. “Of course you didn’t know, Alana. Chilton may be slimy, but this is beyond . . . well, beyond anything he’s shown himself capable of. How could you have known?”

“I didn’t, I swear I didn’t.”

Hannibal’s chest rumbles with a soft, soothing purr. He presses his nose to Will’s hair. “No one here believes otherwise. Please don’t trouble yourself.”

From the corner of Will’s eyes, he sees her nod against her open hands and fall heavily into the stool next to Jack.

Will reads the title of the court order again. His mouth feels numb. “So, Gideon’s the proprietor of what, an omegan halfway house? I don’t even know what that is.”

“A temporary location for omegas displaced from their homing alphas, when an institute suspends the alpha’s ability to home omegas,” Hannibal says softly, petting through Will’s hair. Will leans into the feeling with a soft, curling whine. “Dr. Chilton has concluded that I

am unfit to home you. It would be a poor use of governmental funds to send you back to the institute for tending, should the welfare office ultimately rule in my favor. Or at least, that was the stated purpose of halfway houses when they were first created. They, too, are now funded by taxpayer dollars. Until such a ruling, and while the process limps along, you are not eligible for rehoming.”

Will nods against Hannibal’s chest. He waits for . . . something. Anything. For his instincts to stir in indignation, or the old comfort of anxiety to creep in under his skin. It’s with a mix of surprise and mild disgust to realize he feels nothing at all.

Conquered.

The abyss pulses. Will buries himself deeper into Hannibal’s side.

Alana sniffs and rubs a sleeve under her nose. “How is this not an open-and-shut case? The Omegan Welfare Protection Act prohibits institute directors from receiving any kind of compensation for homing omegas in a halfway house.”

Jack sighs. “That’s where it gets tricky. As far as the FBI sees it, this order is null and void. We could arrest Chilton now based on the direct deposits alone. What we want is Gideon. And any collectors he may be working with.” When Alana furrows her brow, Jack continues, “As things stand, according to legal anyway, it’s illegal for Dr. Chilton to receive funds for homing an omega at a particular halfway house. But halfway house proprietors aren’t prohibited from *sending* those funds. Nor does the Act prohibit proprietors from . . . well, from farming omegas out to interested alphas, so long as the omega agrees. There’s about a dozen halfway houses in a fifty-mile radius from Chilton’s institute. Wanna take a bet on how often Chilton sends his omegas to Gideon?”

Hannibal hums. “As well as how often Gideon farms them out. Primarily to collectors, I assume?”

“Bingo.” Jack sighs. “I’m . . . reasonably confident I could get the charge against Gideon to stick in court. I mean, it’s two sides of the same coin, really. What funds an institute receives a halfway house must send. But if I’m going to take down a massive middleman like Gideon, I want the case to be airtight. And what would be straight illegal is for a proprietor to actively aid and abet a known collector. The orders and deposits are damn fine circumstantial evidence, but not quite enough to make this a slam dunk. A fish caught once and so on.”

Gently, Hannibal tips Will’s head back with his finger. Only when Will finally summons the will to open his eyes does the alpha speak. “This is what Jack and I were discussing when we walked in. They want you to assist the FBI in securing Drs. Gideon and Chilton both. And they need is my permission to do it.” Hannibal pauses. “Are there any particular collectors Dr. Gideon favors, Jack?”

“Mason Verger. Almost exclusively.”

There’s a noise, a small, abortive sound that barely escapes Will, but which stirs the room alive. Color and light flare in the room, chased just as quickly when he blinks.

“*What?*” Alana swings around to look at Jack. “No, absolutely not. Mason Verger – the *damage* – Jack, we talked about this. Mason Verger is the last person that should come anywhere near Will. He’s already on house arrest for collecting as it is! Why would you possibly need more evidence and especially from one of the omegas he’s already collected?”

Shouting over her, Jack says, “The case against Verger is falling apart, okay? It turns out some of our agents-well, the details don’t matter. But if you’re familiar with the concept of fruit of the poisonous tree, you’d get the shitfuck predicament the FBI’s in right now.” He turns to Will with his eyebrows raised and his arms open, warm, and inviting “You want to take down a collector, right? I know you do. All I need is-“

“My god! Are you listening to yourself?” Alana says. “He doesn’t work for you anymore!”

Hannibal dips his head and noses against Will’s ear as Alana and Jack begin to argue in earnest. His breath is warm and sweet. Despite the noises and flurry of new scents swirling around Will, he feels an absurd tug of arousal.

He is *safe*. He is safe here in Hannibal’s kitchen and between the alpha’s arms. *His* alpha.

Conquered.

Pain laces through his gut.

Hannibal presses his lips directly against the opening of Will’s ear. Over the increasing din of Alana and Jack arguing, Will only just hears, “We can run. I have the resources.”

“Just stop for a second and look at them,” Alana cries. “The distress this will obviously cause can have untold repercussions on the bond clearly forged-“

“I’m not forcing them to do anything. They are more than capable-“

“This is absolute insanity. You have a whole army of agents happy and willing to work for you. You don’t need Will-”

“Not *omegan* agents. Will has the brains and the skills and the training, all we need-“

“That’s *funny*,” Alana says. Her natural blackberry scent blooms and then sours. “I thought the FBI’s official position was that omegas aren’t capable of being agents. Isn’t that why Prurnell flat-out refused to back our recent amendments to the Act? The hypocrisy!”

Jack’s eyes are fixed on Will. “Listen-“

This time, it’s Hannibal who interjects with a low rumbling growl that silences the room. Beside him, Will shivers.

Hannibal says, “This is not Will’s decision to make. It’s mine. And the answer is no.”

The numbness slowly invading Will’s body and mind alike cracks to coat the entirety of his skin in a thick, tacky substance. It weighs on him like a straightjacket, both easing the pain of the abyss and riling his instincts into a fury. They are loud in his head.

How dare he! How dare he! He promised to take you to Mason! He promised, Will, he promised he would be different! Promised he wanted equality and not an omega to control! Promised you! How dare he?

Will can't focus his mind. It darts between his instincts, half of whom are encouraging him to sink back into the roil of his omegan submission, the other half screaming obscenities. He settles on one of their more rational brethren. It's mouth, wet and dripping, does not open, though Will hears it speak all the same.

The alpha can no longer be trusted.

Distantly, he hears Jack and Alana resume arguing.

He has betrayed you.

Hannibal is watching the argument unfold on the far side of the kitchen with an expression caught somewhere between exasperation and amusement.

Before he's made the conscious decision to speak, Will curls his upper lip into a sneer. "Proditor."

Hannibal's eyes cut to Will's mouth.

"You *promised*. I give you a chance to convince me not to - not to go to the sea. You give me Mason." Will's words are flat. They fail – utterly and completely – to capture the grief and disappointment winding their way through his veins like a locust swarm, consuming what small bits of himself remain untainted by Hannibal's hands and words. What little of him has yet to be swallowed whole by the man Will is still desperately clutching.

Hannibal has conquered him.

He closes his eyes, letting the numbness consume him like a living, breathing thing in need of a sustenance only his withering self-control can provide.

When he opens his eyes, his decision is made.

He squirms a little in Hannibal's arms until he can untuck one of his hands to press it to the alpha's neck. Through the touch, he feeds *a desire to help, need, and desperate, frantic longing*.

With effort, he feeds, *Let me decimate the Verger Estate, destroy the bastard in property and in name. Let the Vergers be annulled to history by my hand. Please, Hannibal. Please. You promised.*

Hannibal remains silent for a long moment. So long, Will begins to fidget under his anticipated refusal, only to still when he scents *resolve* rearing heavy and high. Hannibal tips Will's head back with a finger. Will's eyes fly shut, afraid the fury – the absolute, bone-charring *fury* – coursing through him like a sickness will show on his face.

It is a long, long moment before he can open them again. When he does, his sight is blurred and wet.

“Will, if you go, if you were to succeed . . .” Hannibal’s eyes are more pupil than iris. A low, bitter note of *shame* weaves through his words. “I won’t lose you. To the tide or anything else. I *can’t*.”

There is only the suggestion of a crack in Hannibal’s voice. A little split, the shifting of sand more than a rending divide in the earth. Into it, Hannibal deposits *desperation, furious helplessness, promised vengeance*.

It’s only an echo, but it’s enough to stir Will’s instincts still steadfastly the alpha’s favor alive again. And again, he gives into them completely.

He dissolves into scents and sounds. At first, he can only squirm against Hannibal’s chest, overwhelmed with the omegan need to soothe, to placate. He pushes himself flush against Hannibal’s body, or perhaps Hannibal pulls him closer. It matters not, for once he settles into motion, he can’t stop. He whines, noises that are not noises but the soft trill of bells. His hands fly to Hannibal’s shoulders and he pets down and around Hannibal’s back and then up towards his neck. His fingers trace the curves of jaw and lip and ear.

“*Alpha*,” he croons. His voice is such a high, sweet-sounding thing he doesn’t realize for a moment it’s coming from him. “*Alpha, alpha. Alpha.*”

His submissive pleading doesn’t matter either, is already forgotten when he runs his cheek against Hannibal’s shirt before moving briskly to his neck. He will *cover* Hannibal in his scent. *Drown* him in it, until the alpha no longer feels the weight of his confession.

Horror grips him. A *nest*, he doesn’t have a nest. He has nowhere to take Hannibal. Nowhere to bury and shelter him from the knowledge that he cannot protect his omega, can’t protect Will, and *no, no, no*.

“Oh, no,” Will whispers. “Oh no, oh Hannibal, I’m sorry, I don’t-I don’t-a nest, I-“

“Hush, sweet thing,” Hannibal says into Will’s hair. He raises a hand to gently cup the back of Will’s head. He smells sweet and satisfied. “You’ve done nothing wrong. It is I alone that am unwilling to take the risk.”

Will taps his fingertips against his own chest and feels the abyss tap back. It grounds him. “The sea, though, it’s already . . . it’s too late. It’s gone.” He taps his fingers harder. “There’s no risk. I still . . . I don’t care anymore. About last light, all of it, it doesn’t matter. Not after. . . The light’s gone now. All of them are. The sea-just-*please*, Hannibal.”

He’s babbling, nonsensical and borderline hysterical, but whatever Hannibal hears, it’s enough. The alpha presses his palm flat against Will’s chest with a slight pressure, as though the abyss is little more than a cyst that can be drained with enough physical force.

“Oh, Jack,” Alana says. Will turns to her. Her empathy is a strong, billowing wind that pokes at his skin like claws. “Look at them. How can you even suggest separating them?”

To his credit, Jack looks as chagrined as he smells. Rubbing a thick hand against the back of his neck, he says, "Look, it's hardly ideal, but it's the best chance we have to take everyone down in one fell swoop."

Hannibal shifts their position, moving Will slowly until he's mostly hidden from the rest of the room behind Hannibal's back. Will wants to protest but exhaustion is beginning to creep up his spine.

Resolve peaks from the alpha. "I am not yet certain I will give my permission. If I do, if Will does this, Jack, then we need something from you."

Will rubs his forehead where he's rested it against Hannibal's back. He feels more than hears the quick rumble of a purr skip against the back of Hannibal's ribs.

"Okay," Jack says slowly. "Let's hear it."

"The two files you gave Will - the Falls Road Arsonist and the Panty Bandit?" Will doesn't hear Jack respond but the alpha must nod, for Hannibal continues. "You would agree with Will's assessment that there are two criminals at play and they are unrelated except by coincidence of their hunting grounds."

Jack grunts.

Will lets out his breath. He rubs his nose quickly into Hannibal's shirt, puffing up the scents still lingering there. *Resolve. Resolve, pleasure, self-congratulation.*

"And you would also agree that the trail for the arsonist has gone cold?"

"I-"

"*And,*" Hannibal says, "to what I have no doubt will be the dismay of the agents presently assigned to the case, you agree there is insufficient evidence to ever successfully identify the arsonist."

Long moments pass. Finally, Jack says, "Does Will believe the Falls Road Arsonist is responsible for Randall Tier?"

"He does."

Silence falls, heavy and hot. Alana's mild confusion is tangy and overripe and swallowed almost entirely by her piquing interest.

"Dr. Lecter. A case only goes cold if the crimes stop."

Resolve. Forlorn disquiet. Resolve. Resolve, resolve, resolve.

Hannibal turns his head a little to look back at Will, but Will remains still, his eyes closed. "If memory serves, the fire at the Tier residence was the first time the arsonist had struck in months. And Will, do correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe he is winding down. He may soon intend to move on, or he is losing interest. Perhaps his thirst has been slaked.

Regardless, Will anticipates that there may be a last . . . event, as it were. But only one. And then the arsonist will be done.”

“No, no, no,” Jack says. “No, absolutely not-”

Will unfurls from behind Hannibal’s back with a peeling cry. “Are you *kidding me*, Jack?”

“Will,” both Alana and Hannibal say.

Hannibal reaches for him, but Will snatches his arm away with a snarl. He points at Jack. “You seriously want to stack the life of a half-dozen worthless, monstrous pieces of alphan shit against what must be dozens or hundreds of innocent omegas? You can’t be serious.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Will. You know it doesn’t.”

“Of course it does.” Will throws his arms out to either side of himself, ignoring the pleas from his instincts to defer to the alpha before him and the sorrow threatening to buckle his knees. “This isn’t a test of moral-fucking-turpitude. It’s only the trolley problem. The lesser of evils. This is you having to make a choice and I’m asking you to make the right one. It’s either Chilton alone who gets arrested, or I do my best to bring everyone else down.”

From behind him, Hannibal says, “I scent fire, my love.”

Will takes a deep breath. Heat prickles at his palms. “You wouldn’t be here right now if you weren’t desperate. I can smell it on you. This is the deal.”

Jack deflates a little. “Christ,” he mumbles, wiping a hand down his face.

The doorbell rings.

“Jack,” Will says when the righteous fury billowing from the alpha begins to wane. In the softest voice he can manage, he says, “Let me save them. All those omegas who’d be abused by these asshole alphas. It’s the only power I have. I get to save them. You get Chilton and Gideon, possibly Verger. This is the best outcome for all of us.”

The omega, the beta, and the alphas stand in silence. Will begins to tremble. When Jack finally nods, Hannibal points down the hallway. “Go to the study to discuss the details. Lock the door behind you. It is unlikely I will be able to stall him for long.”

Alana rises to stand beside Hannibal. She returns Will’s quick, intense expression with a nod as Jack herds him down the hallway.

The Verger Estate

Chapter Summary

Will takes his vengeance.

It takes Hannibal less than an hour to register Will's tracking chip.

Omegan low jack, he thinks blithely as he settles himself on the leather sofa in the study.

The tablet against his knees loads to show him a basic, low-frills map of downtown Baltimore. He orients himself to the Chesapeake Bay and begins skimming the screen. He doesn't know where, exactly, Gideon's halfway house is, though enough tidbits dropped into conversations with the man at various social events suggest it's somewhere nearby.

When he fails to see anything resembling a dot or other marker indicating Will's presence, he pinches the screen to reveal more of the map. The website is slow. It stutters, flickering the roads and markers that comprise downtown Baltimore in and out of sight. He waits, impatient for the technological cogs in a faraway server to finish rotating and return the map to him.

Beside him, perched on the arm of the couch, his cell phone buzzes. He tips the screen just enough to see a text from Alana. He replaces it, face down, without reading the message. In his other hand is a fifth, *sixth?* – at least one bottle and half of another – glass of port which he has not enjoyed at all.

The map turns completely white for a moment and reloads somewhere in northern Maryland.

The lines and shapes on the screen swim. Cursing softly, he presses a thumb and forefinger to his eyes and then blinks until the blackness clears and the map is back in focus. He scans the screen once, quickly, but sees nothing – no little dot, no marker, no arrow. He scans again, careful to follow each blue-gray line of the few roads presented to him.

There. A little northwest of the hamlet itself, just west of the Susquehanna River. A blue dot pulses once, twice, and then disappears.

Hannibal blinks rapidly, bringing the tablet closer. With another soft curse, he reloads the page. The map doesn't appear. Instead, written in an inexcusably tiny font he must squint to read are the words *access denied*.

He reloads the page. *Access denied.* Again. *Access denied.*

He logs out of his account and closes the browser. The image of an insipid, odorous young man at an electronics store in the late 1990s nudges at his memory, suggesting he should

leave the device powered down for a few moments before rebooting it. After dithering for a moment, he turns off the tablet.

He waits as it powers back on, blinking slowly at the glossy screen.

Access denied.

Slow and dimwitted on his excess of wine, he replays the image of the blue dot, the surrounding streets, the three words of the nearby city that had struck a chord somewhere deep in his subconscious.

It's a city home to no more than a sleepy downtown its residents charmingly referred to as "the village." A neat little city with neat little roads, quaint in a decidedly lower-middle-class way, over which hangs the black cloud scent of the nearby slaughterhouse, tucked carefully into the sprawling expanse of the Verger Estate.

The City of Havre de Grace.

Mason Verger.

Hannibal is on his feet before he realizes he's stood. The room spins delicately, just enough to force his eyes closed. Slowly, carefully, he sits back against the sofa with his knees bent and his socked feet firmly on the ground.

His cell phone is in his hand, the screen unlocked and lit, though he can't recall retrieving it.

Hey there – just checking in. How are you?

The words of Alana's multiply, flutter apart, and dance around each other. His fingers are slow and clumsy and his ire flares as he presses more incorrect places on the screen than not.

Will is already being taken to Mason Verger. I thought we had more time.

I know. Tracking him now.

He spends close to an eternity reading her response and half of another as he types out a reply. *And?*

Mason Verger can have guests over and they can stay as long as he wants. Including any omegas he picks up from halfway houses.

He's still absorbing the words when his phone vibrates with another text.

I know you're anxious about Will being sent back to Mason. I am, too. But we're really only moving the timeline forward a bit. This was the plan.

His next text is a flurry of inebriated impatience, rife with typos and mistaken punctuation that he doesn't bother to correct. He closes one eye, squinting at the screen as he reads it back to himself. Suddenly, with a groan, he finds the effort of sending it to be more exhausting than it's worth.

Will is being taken to Mason Verger. Now. Not in a day or two, not in a week. Now. Right now.

Hannibal is on his feet again, his teeth bared against the way the room tips. He stalks the length of it anyway. When he reaches one set of bookshelves, he turns and stalks back, sways, and grips the edge of the nearby desk to steady himself. The protective leather case around his phone whines under his fingers.

No. No, no, no.

He's not entirely sure what he's railing against. Will assured him the sea was gone – Hannibal himself had detected the stark change in Will's scent. He'd believed the boy completely and had no reason to doubt either the words or his own assessment.

Yet.

His instincts are silent, watching him muddle through the evening's events with tentative eyes.

He is no longer at risk of losing Will to lapping waves or an encroaching tide; to a sea dark and furious as it refuses to be quelled by the flickering presence of a lone man along the shore.

Or so Will claims.

He's been foolish. Years of painstaking training to mold himself, first into a medical doctor and later in the pursuit of psychiatry, has left him with a firm understanding of human behavior. Suicidal ideation may on rare occasion resolve itself squarely in the favor of whom it inflicts. But more often than not, *more often than not*, it lingers with detached menace in the crevices of the mind, ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness.

The tide may have ebbed, but it made no promise in its hasty retreat not to flow again. And if Will kills Mason – if the sea returns *when* Will kills Mason – Hannibal may still lose him.

Will had asked for Hannibal to trust him.

He *can't*.

He can admit, with a kind of longing that cinches the piano wire at his gut, that his plans to save the boy from himself have been, at best, half-formed. But he knows something of vengeance. His own desires, sated long ago, have the shape of a snowy Lithuanian forest instead of a neglected shore. They come to him in the putrid scents of cooking meat and unwashed men. Eons, decades, a lifetime has passed since he'd exacted his revenge with the stealth and steel fostered by his upbringing. He had gorged himself on what remained and had been satisfied.

Will cannot be. His boy, that precious, remarkable, *damnable* little creature, he remains tied to the corporeal earth only by what he has left to do. Because he doesn't want to be tied.

No.

Hannibal groans. He will not lose Will to the sea. He will not, *he will not, he will not.*

The rending smash of his fist against the desk feels good. The shudder of pain that flares up into his shoulder feels better.

No.

He takes a handful of calming breaths through his nose and straightens himself from his desk, correcting his shirt cuffs where they've ridden up his arms. For a moment he only stands, his mind blissfully blank, before moving to the bar. He tips the bottles back, one by one as Will had done after absconding from the manor, and that feels good, too. As does the weight of a stout tumbler in his hand and the smoky, burnt scent of a campfire on the back of his tongue.

The shattering cry of crystal breaking against the hearth feels even better.

* * * * *

Gideon looks pleased as he raises Will's bound hands to eye level. They are wound in an itchy elastic bandage-type fabric that makes Will want to set fire to the van and everyone in it.

"A neat little trick, isn't it?" Gideon says. He drops Will's hands and settles himself more comfortably into his seat. "I had this feisty, dark beauty once that could do something kind of similar with emotions. But binding her hands brought her to her knees. Though, in fairness, what she could do, it was—" he turns to Chilton "—what did you call it again, Freddie?"

Chilton hadn't wanted to join them for the ride and isn't bothering to hide his displeasure now. His responding frown is deep, as is the way his eyes roll towards the back door of the van where a window ought to be.

His pinched mouth makes a *tsking* sound around his tongue. "A parlor trick."

"Yes, yes, a *parlor trick*," Gideon says. His eyes are bright when he looks back at Will.

"Compared, at least, to what you can do, Mr. Graham. Which is quite the experience from all I've heard. Come now, then, show us a trick."

Chilton flinches in Will's periphery.

Will simply looks at Gideon.

"Oh, now," Gideon says, lifting himself with effort from one of the metal benches lining the length of the van's cargo trunk. He settles himself next to Will, smelling of woodsmoke and burnt plastic.

"Humor me, Mr. Graham, would you? It would mean just so much. I haven't gone all these lengths, after all, only to . . ." Gideon places the tip of his index finger gently against Will's hands. "But wait, *can* you?"

Will says nothing, only flexes his fingers as much as the bandages will allow.

Gideon laughs and the sound is a soft, mournful chuckle as he begins to unwrap the bandages.

The gesture brings an immediate cry from Chilton. “Abel, you cannot be serious. The creature is apt to set fire to the van!”

Gideon is far too close for Will not to scent him. *Self-righteous pleasure* and *hunger* had been the alpha’s most defining scents until now. It’s with a cold sort of ache that Will identifies *breathless anticipation* as it meanders into the small space between them.

Gideon pauses in unwrapping Will’s bandages to look at him. Will finds himself caught in the stare, his lips parting around an emotion he’s too anxious to properly identify.

“Wait for it,” Gideon breathes. His eyes roam to the roof of the van.

“Abel, really-“ Chilton starts, but his words are soon lost to the scent that reaches Will.

The noise Will makes is no better than a strangled moan. Still, Gideon produces a distracted soothing sound deep in his diaphragm. The alpha is too close – far too close – for Will not to catch the euphoric flash of his teeth.

“Yes, yes, you do know where we are, don’t you?”

Will grew up working the docks along the bayou. The experience left ripe the scents of sweating men and rotting fish in the forefront of his memory. They weren’t scents he loved or hated; they recalled him to a particular place and a particular time. But they left no real impact aside from the way his mind would drift to balmy summers and curse words made beautiful in French each time he passes the frozen fish stand of a supermarket.

But this scent. This scent has meaning.

“Such an unusually awful thing, isn’t it?” Gideon wrinkles his nose. “A whole town sprung from the smelly slaughter of pigs. It’s remarkable. Humans are fantastically adaptive.”

Will’s tongue is heavy in his mouth.

Gideon is still contemplating the ceiling and though he doesn’t move his head, his eyes flicker downward until Will sees more white than pupil. “I do wonder what caused an omega such attachment to Mason Verger, the collector, of all people.” He rebinds Will’s hands.

“Well, I suppose Frederick is right. Now is not the time to show us your magic. I’d love to see you in action, of course, but I suppose a man like Mason wouldn’t pay the kind of dowry he paid for you unless you were a true powerhouse. Maybe he’ll grant me a demonstration, just a little spot of fun, once you’re back on your leash.”

Will says nothing. Gideon allows it.

* * * * *

It’s like coming home.

Even as Will is placed in a cell underneath the wellhouse. Even as his hands remain bound in scratchy fabric. Even as he reacclimates to the furiously terrible scent of the slaughterhouse. There's an urge to smile he doesn't bother to suppress as he sinks onto the scattering of straw spread across the stone floor of his cell.

He is home. He knows he's home with a certainty that relaxes the tension he's carried in his arms since he'd left the manor.

Hannibal.

The name jerks him into a wary sort of displeasure at odds with the scents and sights around him. He tucks his hands between his legs and buries his face into his knees.

He must have slept, though he neither remembers falling asleep nor waking. When he next looks around, the cracked sandy stones lining the floor are a few shades darker. The gray bricks around the well are closer to black than white. What little daylight ever reaches this damp pit has waned.

The wellhouse is heated, but only just. Enough that he doesn't need to bundle in winter clothing but too little to stop his muscles from shivering. His mind wanders as the light continues to dim. Goosebumps appear and fail to fade from his forearms.

The last time he was here, the omegas were stacked two or three to a cage and could huddle together for warmth. They'd slept fitfully, but they'd slept. Now, he is alone.

The light continues to fall until he can only just make out two or three large shapes of deepest black against the colorlessness of everything else. With his hands bound, it's impossible to gather enough straw to sit comfortably. He lays down instead, first on his back and then on either side, restless and uneasy. To distract himself, he thinks.

He has no real fear Mason will kill him – there are few things less helpful to an alpha intending to escape justice than a dead omega at his property. The homing chip tucked behind his ear, too, should alert the institute should his heart stop.

Will winces into the blackness. It's a failsafe that would prove useless if Chilton was the one to receive the alert. Still, it's difficult to imagine that Alana wouldn't find out somehow. She's likely tracking him now. And surely she'd find a way to tell someone that would ensure he didn't slip away from the world unnoticed. Hannibal, too, might help.

Hannibal.

Will blinks into inky nothingness.

Conquered.

He has no fight left in him.

In its most basic definition, Mason has no *right* to live. Will has little desire to see him continue as he is, inflicting pain and riotous bouts of horror as easily as other men breathe.

Mason's death, his untimely demise by Will's own ash-cruised hands, has been the movie reel at the back of his mind that has kept him marching forward all these months.

In Hannibal's bed this morning – Christ, was it just that very morning? – there had been a singular, too-sweet moment of hope. And the feeling had remained after he'd touched bruises in a space that smelled much too much like Hannibal. Only for Will to open the bedroom door to find the world dulled and muted in the wake of the sea's retreat.

If the sea is gone, if it has indeed abandoned him at his most vulnerable moment, something must have risen in its place. As though summoned by the thought, the abyss behind his breastbone pulses. He places a hand over the ache and draws his knees to his chest.

And then, he sees: it had been the sea that kept his world vibrant. The sea, in its furious roil, has kept his heart beating, given him purpose in a world that had abandoned him alongside his first heat. He had been as truthful with Hannibal as he'd known how to be – it's true, he no longer wants to be swept away by indifferent waters. But neither does he believe there is a place in this world he can live both happy and omegan. Not now that the sea, his *purpose* is gone.

He curves further into himself.

Suddenly, there's light. The electric flair of a naked bulb shines down into the well, illuminating the pit below. He hears soft, agile footsteps. Terror draws ribbons tight around his chest as the scent of alpha follows.

When he gathers the courage to open his eyes, Margot stands turned away from him. One of her hips and a slim, delicate shoulder rest against the well. Her arms are crossed. She looks at nothing. In this moment of cold indifference, she smells more like her brother than herself. Still, the sight causes warmth to gather in his throat.

"Don't you want to welcome me home?" he asks with more petulance than he feels.

Margot's gaze flickers to him and then rolls away. "He's missed you."

"Is business so bad without me?"

"Business is fine."

"In that case, I hope he handles impatience well. He's about two weeks late for my heat."

She exhales a quick, angry puff of air, but instead of speaking, only tucks her chin into her chest and closes her eyes. She crosses her arms – *defensive, protective, tentative*.

"I don't suppose you'd undo my bindings?" Will says. He wants to ask her if the all-black outfit Mason has trussed her up in is as soft as he remembers. "Or fetch me a glass of water."

"Why are you here?"

Anger flares briefly but crystalline sharp on his tongue. "I didn't choose this, Margot. It seems your dear brother is in cahoots with the institute."

Margot turns to him. Her arms remain crossed, her back hunched and her chest shrunk as though all these months later she's still trying to prevent her skin from touching the fabric of her uniform. Her electric blue eyes are glassy in the low light. "This, Will. This, right here? It's all that I have."

Will looks around. Near one cage, the sandy stone floor is charred. The stonework looks brittle and flayed.

She takes a few quick steps towards his cage, until she can wrap her hands around the iron bars and pull her face to rest against them. Lips bared, fangs exposed, she says, "Randall Tier. Nicholas Boyle. Clark Ingham. Tobias Budge. Eldon Stammets."

The image of Will's little green book floats to the surface of his memory. He adjusts his position on the floor again, opens his mouth, closes it.

He's so tired. Too tired. And too weak.

Too omegan.

In love with a monster.

Conquered and slain.

He bows his head to hide the sneer tugging at his upper lip. "Just happened to find those names browsing obituaries, did you?"

"No. Jack Crawford paid us a visit. Asked whether you'd ever shown signs of psychopathology. Whether you've ever confessed wanting to *hurt* anyone."

"Margot--"

"If you kill him, the institute is all I have to look forward to."

She steps away from the cage and wipes her hands against her pants. She turns her face up towards the light around the opening of the well, as though basking in the warmth of the single bulb despite the winter chill. Will thinks she looks beautiful. He wonders when Mason last let her outside.

To the light, she says, "This is the hell I know. The only hell I want to know."

She turns towards the back end of the pit, lithe and beautiful and devastating, and just as he sees the last of her round the well, he says, "I'm *tired*."

"We're all tired," Margot says from the darkness. "Welcome home."

* * * * *

Will isn't sure how much time passes before he's roused from sleep by the sound of slow footsteps coming down the wellhouse stairs. He tries to stand as a hulking figure breaches the

pit, panic making his heart and muscles twitch. Suddenly, wildly, Will can't figure out how to go from sitting cross-legged to standing with his hands bound.

"Will."

The voice that speaks his name is deep, almost sonorous and . . . hesitant. Will might have called it *shy* if his instincts could stop choking on the muck long enough to speak.

"Hey . . . Will."

The giant stops in a wash of light. His head is turned a little so a shadow obscures the scar of a fixed cleft lip.

Will takes a deep breath of his own and tries to calm the worst of his panic. His smile is small but genuine. "Hey, big guy."

The giant gives him a lopsided grin. He inhales again. When he speaks, his words are slow and careful. "I'd . . . heard you were here."

Powerful, Will thinks, as he so often has when in Francis's presence. *Strong, capable, virile*.

Will cocks his head. Just a little, enough so the pale sweep of his neck is more visible. He watches Francis through his lashes. The alpha's reaction is – always has been – dramatic-bordering-absurd. He's an attractive man and startlingly so, a fact known and discussed with flippancy amongst the Verger Estate staff and guests. It's an attractiveness that Will has seen arrest men and women, omegas and betas and other alphas alike, even if the giant himself believes anyone who pays him attention is mocking him.

Once, in another life, Will had tried in earnest to show Francis his beauty. Late at night, long after the estate had settled into sleep and just a few hours before it would rise again, he and Will sat in Francis's bedroom in the west wing. Side-by-side at the foot of the giant's bed, a full-length mirror propped before them. At first, Francis had refused to look at it, the same way he refused to look at anything that might show his reflection back to him.

Will had been patient. He'd been kind. When he'd breached the space between them to place a gentle finger against the giant's warm palm, he'd fed through the touch what he and countless others felt each time they saw him.

The alpha had jerked his hand away. He'd stood and walked to the window near the bed, holding his hand in the other as though Will's touch had burned him.

"Don't . . . be cruel. You're not . . . a cruel person."

Francis's scar detracts nothing from his beauty. But it's presence has cleaved a deep trench within him that smells of sulfur and which, when it bubbles over to poison the giant properly, turns him feral.

In the wellhouse, Francis's pupils dilate. Will inhales around *shock*, around *desire*, around *self-hatred* (burning cold and decayed flesh) until he finds the clean sweat and sour-berry scent of *hope*. He's never liked the smell.

Still, he takes hold of it between his teeth and purrs into the quiet shade of the wellhouse. Francis ducks his head, this time against a blush.

“It’s good to see you, too,” Will says and finds that he means it. “All’s good?”

“Yeah,” Francis says. He rubs a hand against the back of his neck like a child might in the face of praise. “I’ve . . . been made head of the guard. I have my own suite now.”

Will nods but doesn’t ask what became of Matteo.

Suddenly, the giant’s demeanor shifts and with it, sulfur rises. Will braces himself. “Mason wants to see you.”

“Oh,” Will says. Cold ribbons spring again to grip his chest. “Oh, yeah, okay.”

Francis makes a sweet cooing sound, one that would be a soothing shushing sound from anyone else, but for the giant’s aversion to ‘s’ sounds, is a soft chitter instead.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Francis moves to unlock the cage, his brow furrowed. “Mason’s not mad. He . . . wants to welcome you back.”

Without thinking, without really meaning to, Will finds himself leaning towards the alpha once the cage door no longer stands as a fortress between them. *Shock* and *happy pleasure* momentarily overpower *tentative hope*. *Affection* rears high and heavy as Francis gathers Will in his arms.

Will inhales deeply, ignoring the slight wisps of sulfur in favor of the emotions spilling from the alpha like a punctured drum.

Love.

Affection.

Desire.

Protectiveness.

In that other lifetime, so long ago, Will had entertained thoughts of giving himself to Francis. He’d considered asking him to leave, to set off away from the estate and towards the horizon. The only thing that had pulled him back was the sound of the sea.

* * * * *

Mason is laying flat on his back on the bed in Will’s old bedroom when he and Francis enter.

At once, Will is aware of the giant’s warm hand resting protectively, *possessively* on his lower back, though the only person to notice is Margot, whose eyes flick briefly towards them before returning to stare off into the middle distance. She’s sitting on the chaise lounge on the far side of the room. Her legs are crossed, her hips positioned on the upholstered leather so she can gaze out the window instead of at her brother.

Will takes a disjointed step towards her but freezes when Mason rises from the bed. The alpha circles him, circles both him and Francis, before positioning himself almost flush to Will's side. One of Mason's hands rests against Will's chest with a jocular lightness, the other skimming down to tuck between Will's back and Francis's hand.

Francis concedes and steps away.

"Will, what an absolute *pleasure* it is to see you again," Mason says, tapping Will's chest with a thump-thump that is a notch too hard. "How has my little mind reader been?"

"Fine," Will says, matching Mason's sharp smile. "Francis tells me Matteo had to be replaced."

Mason swings his head back and sighs. "Oh, Matteo. Yes, yes, that's quite right." He draws up close to Will, stretching his mouth into a comical grimace. As he speaks, he bobs his head to accent each word. "Matteo had a little accident with the pigs."

Will cocks an eyebrow. "An accident?"

Mason cackles and thumps his hand again over Will's chest. "Oh, but it is *good* to have you back. I'm sure you've already forgiven me for that little stint in the wellhouse, but really, considering what happened the last time we were there you can't really blame me, now can you?"

Will says nothing.

"Excellent, then. And look, I know you're not really here . . . willingly, or what have you. But I do hope we can pick up right where we left off, like the dear, dear friends we are." Mason turns on the balls of his feet to survey the room. "There's a phone and a laptop and a tablet. Your email address is alive and kicking. Uniforms in the closet, walkie-talkie and earpiece on the desk, let's see. . . . We had to let Annabelle go, of course, the wretch. Margot will help keep your calendar in order, won't you, Margot?"

Across the room, Margot clears her throat, though she doesn't take her eyes off the window.

"Oh, yes, yes, that's right." He turns to Will, dipping his head to look at him above the rim of his glasses. "Since you've been gone, we've added a few extra precautions. Be a good chap and keep your hood up when roaming the grounds, won't you?"

Will nods. "Feds still poking around?"

"Yes, and you wouldn't *believe* the nuisance it's been." Mason shakes a foot between them, drawing Will's eyes to the monitor at his ankle. "But don't worry, the case will be dropped soon enough. The FBI fumbled everything but their own dicks ransacking the place and I've got a fantastic lawyer. It's only a matter of time, really."

"Mason."

"*Sister.*" Mason's smile doesn't flicker, but his tone splinters like ice. Will averts his gaze to Francis who's eyes are steady on the other alpha, his expression fixed and neutral. "Francis,

do excuse us for a moment. Just-" he flicks his hand at the door "-wait in the hall, would you?"

Francis leaves without a word, closing the door softly behind him. The second the giant is gone, Mason plops himself on the edge of the bed and pats the space next to him. Will joins him without thought. He doesn't flinch as Mason throws an arm around his shoulder. The familiarity of it all seeps with earnest into his marrow.

"Here's the thing," Mason says. "Margot and I had a few chats after you left. We've reached an understanding of sorts. Well, really, Margot came to a conclusion and I'm just snuff out of arguments." Mason laughs loudly, *angrily* and squeezes his arm a little around Will's neck. "The long and short of it is that I can have you one of two ways. Either you can be my helpful little mind reader. Or I can fuck you. One or the other." He looks at Margot. "Apparently."

Margot blinks.

"I'll admit, that whole thing in the wellhouse the last time you were here, that was my bad. And it took more than a few heated conversations for me to get it, didn't it, dear one?" Mason cranes his head around and waits for Margot to nod before continuing. "That's my fault. My foul and *mea culpa* and all that. But I did get it." The sigh Mason breathes against Will's cheek is world-weary. "But I mean, if we are being perfectly fair, I do provide housing and clothes and food and entertainment. Still, it is what it is. And, really, I've got plenty of loose tail on the grounds that would be just thrilled to meet Mason, Jr. so no harm. No harm and no foul." He stands from the bed and shoots Margot a look. "We good?"

She nods and Mason claps his hands together. "Fantastic." He looks at Will. "I'll give you the day to unwind. Get caught up to speed with Margot and Francis and whoever else. Let's start bright and early at 10:00 a.m., shall we?"

At Will's nod, he pats the side of Will's face briskly. "Great! Margot?"

To the window, she says, "Let me catch up with Will now. I'll meet you downstairs."

Mason rolls his eyes with such violence it swings his head around. As he leaves the room, he shouts back, "*Ugh*, fine. One hour. Parlor room. Don't be late. Francis, come."

From the edge of the bed, Will rubs the toe of his boot against the stone floor.

This is easy.

Mason might be a flamboyant, maniacal psychopath, but he's predictable. Margot, too, and Francis. He knows the peaks and pitfalls inherent to these relationships and, more, had figured them out much faster than he had with Hannibal.

Motivations are easy for Will.

Hannibal, though . . .

A disjointed giddiness he does not understand skitters under his skin. He shimmies across the bed until he is flat on his stomach, one arm tucked under a pillow, to look at Margot. She is intent on avoiding his gaze but does move her eyes to him when he says her name. He mouths, *cameras*? She shakes her head, relaxes even more.

“You don’t have any reason to believe me,” he says. “But I mean it when I say you have nothing to fear.”

At this, she looks directly at him, electric blue irises making a quick circuit of his face.

He closes his eyes, burying his face a little into the pillow, though whether it’s to escape her gaze or his own guilt, he couldn’t say. He feels rudderless, as though he’s churning in angry waters with no rescue in sight. “And, you know, thank you. Seriously. For your chats with Mason. I’m sure they weren’t easy. But with that issue put to bed, well, it’s like you said - there are levels of hell and it’s not so bad here.”

Margot stands abruptly from the chaise lounge and heads towards the hallway. Will’s eyes follow her retreat, sitting up to keep her in his line of sight just as she pauses at the open bedroom door.

She crosses her arms. “I really hope that’s true.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

Margot’s expression doesn’t soften, not truly, but her shoulders dip a little. “I did try to stop him, you know, when you went into heat. I told him you’d react poorly.”

“I know.”

“That fire, Will-“

“I know. I know.”

“Mason thought I’d lied to him about your enhanced abilities.”

Will blinks quickly though he doesn’t look away. It’s suddenly difficult to swallow. “I’m sorry.”

She nods and looks around the room again. He inhales quietly and detects salt, coriander, and the sweet decay of poplars wilting in humid heat. *Uncertainty, hesitation.*

He says, “You don’t owe me anything. Stay defensive if it’ll be easier. You have to protect yourself.”

“He’s thrilled to have you back,” she says quickly. “Keeps talking about your new offensive abilities.”

Will’s fingers twitch with the sudden need to place his hands over hers, wrap his arms around her, and bring her to him. He wants to burrow her under the heaps of blankets and pillows on

the bed behind him; wants to fetch her something warm and sweet to drink, run his fingers through her hair, tell her a story and make her laugh.

His instincts stir. *Protect her. Keep her safe.* He rises from the bed and takes a step towards her only to stop when she takes a step back. He ignores the pang of rejection that flares in his gut.

Margot eyes him for a long moment. Finally, when he remains still, she says, “He’ll try to provoke you. Keep your emotions in check if you plan on staying for a while.”

She leaves. Will takes a moment to collect himself, eyeing the spattering of electronics on the desk before turning to the closet. He has every intention of sliding the heavy doors apart without a second thought but finds himself stuck, frozen with his hands on the wrought iron handles.

Conquered.

He opens the doors.

Blindly, he fumbles at the clothing inside, ignoring the way his instincts titter as the soft fabric slips between his fingers. Seconds later, he’s stripped himself of the coveralls and is pulling the all-black ensemble over his head with a feeling of reverence the moment doesn’t deserve.

He grabs a pair of black pants and black socks from the dresser near the bed. He hooks and crosses the laces of the combat boots with practiced ease.

In the adjoining bathroom, he opens the drawer to the left of the sink. The only item inside, the only item that’s ever been inside, is a wide, low jar of hair pomade. Long ago, Mason had made clear he prefers his staff to maintain a certain style in their dress and appearance. It might have been for the juxtaposition alone: Mason’s mad scientist mop of blond hair sticking out at every possible angle, in contrast to the demure, slicked back style of his entourage. The way Mason had taken a certain prurient interest in tussling Will or Margot’s carefully coiffed hair until it looked disheveled, forcing them to find a mirror to set it right.

Will unscrews the lid of the jar. A noise somewhere between a sob and a sigh catches at his throat at the scent. *Pepper, oak, tea tree, rosemary.* He holds his breath, two fingers gathering a dollop of the oily substance. He rubs his hands together before running them through his hair. He does it again and then a third time until the curls near his forehead no longer fight to fall back into his face and he is surrounded, *suffocated* in the scent. Only then does he look at the mirror above the sink.

For a moment, he can see only pieces of himself: dark hair, dark body, pale face, and stunning, stunning electric blue eyes. When his gaze finally settles, he has only two thoughts.

He looks beautiful.

He looks dangerous.

He turns off the light before he can think anything else and goes to find Mason.

It's an easy enough task. Mason has always employed a number of alphas that have free reign of the house and grounds, enough so that the estate always smells distinctly of peppers and bonfires, forcing Will to search for subtler scents. As he rounds a corner of the hallway, he detects the low-boiling sulfur scent of Francis nearby. A few steps closer and he's struck with what he's been looking for: a warm summer breeze, car exhaust, chlorine, and candy.

Glee. Mason.

Chlorine and sulfur grow stronger when Will stops at the closed door of Mason's office. He runs his fingers through his hair again, pushing the curls closer to his head. With a deep sigh, he raps his knuckles softly on the door.

It opens at once. An alpha he doesn't recognize but who's wearing the same outfit he is peers down at him.

Will's instincts vibrate in his chest as he meets the alpha's dull maroon eyes, demanding he *look away, look down, take a step back! Deference, Will, give him deference!*

Will blinks but keeps his gaze steady. "Is Mason free? Can he talk?"

From behind the alpha, Will hears Mason's voice, tired and a touch annoyed. "Well, who is it, Rinaldo? Let them in."

The alpha steps aside. Mason is sitting at the desk opposite the door, his lean legs crossed and resting on the olivewood surface. When he sees Will, he unclasps his hands from behind his head and brings them slowly to the arms of his chair.

"Oh, *my*," he says, dipping his head a little to look at Will through his lashes. "That was quick."

"We need to talk," Will says, surprised by the steadiness of his voice. "Alone."

It's only then he notices Francis and Margot sitting on a bench near the fireplace as they stand in unison. The handful of other black-clad men in the room take their cue and begin collecting themselves by pocketing cell phones and guns or straightening their outfits where they've ridden too high or fallen too low.

Will watches Mason. The alpha's eyes grow wide. An incredulous smile flashes across his face before he raises one of his hands, "No."

A feeling of immense, overwhelming power snaps electricity under Will's skin.

The room stills.

Mason removes his feet from his desk to lean across it on his elbows. He temples his fingers. "Now, while I might not blame – or not *entirely* blame – Francis and my dear sister for bowing to Will's demands, there's no excuse for the rest of you. No. No there is not. Cordell?"

A pudgy man in a high-backed chair near Mason rises slowly, keeping his clasped hands bundled in the sleeves of his outfit. The way he stands, the way his bald head reflects the light back in the room dully, all of it reminds Will forcibly of a priest. “Gentlemen, with me.”

Will deflates a little. He steps into the room and away from the threshold, his movements stuttered and ungraceful. He keeps silent as the men file out. Cordell gives Mason a prim little nod before closing the door behind him.

Will looks at Margot. She’s staring straight at the bookshelves lining the opposite wall, her face blank. Francis has his head bowed, a small grimace at his mouth.

Mason’s smile is a rough thing, cruel and calculating as he gestures to one of the chairs before his desk. “After your little trick in my wellhouse summoned the fire department and the police, Margot and I had one of our chats. We decided it would make much more sense to keep the staff as close as possible. They all now eat, sleep, and live here. Circumstances which suit most of them, as they’d really be unemployable otherwise. Isn’t that right, Margot?”

“Yes,” she says. “Most of them are criminals.”

“Yes. Yes, they are. And must find their penance when they disobey. Penance is a specialty of Cordell’s.”

Will’s stomach turns, though he knows better than to speak.

Mason leans back in his chair. “I see you’ve made your choice, and you do look just lovely. Thrilled to have you back on board. Oh, I know! Perhaps we’ll celebrate. Gather up the staff and have you perform your little tricks. Pizza and streamers. We have pizza and streamers, don’t we Margot?” Before she can respond, he waves a hand at her. His eyes are on Will. “So, what do you want to talk about? ”

“The FBI,” Will says. “And why they sent me here.”

It takes every bit of self-control he has to keep his eyes from widening or his lips from parting. His instincts, generally sweet and docile things, surprise him by peering up from the muck with coy expressions. He doesn’t need them to speak to know what they’re thinking. *Whatever are you up to now, Will?*

The answer, of course, is that he doesn’t have the first flipping clue. But before he can think anything else, the room comes alive. Francis frowns at the floor. Margot’s head whips to Will like a loose ball bearing, her eyes wide and her small, pink mouth parted in a way that almost makes him laugh. Mason tips his head back and cackles.

“Oh! Oh, Will, really now.” He places a hand against his chest. “Please, my heart. How fantastic. Just fantastic.”

“Mason-“ Margot starts.

Before she can say anything else, Mason's smile dissolves and he slams a fist hard down on top of his desk. "*No one cares what you think, Margot.*" He leaves his clenched fist on the desk for a moment longer to let the room feel the weight of his words. Then, he runs his hands through his hair, not to smooth the fine locks against his skull, but upward and outward to make them wild. "Okay. Okay, why don't we start at the beginning."

Will wishes he was closer to Margot, so he could lay a finger against her bare wrist and feed her *comfort, hope* and *trust*, and the promise, hot and heavy in his sternum, that she *will* survive what's to come. That while separation from Mason may feel like a penance, she will rise magnificent from its ruin. Instead, he takes comfort in the way Francis just barely adjusts his leg so its pressed flush against hers.

Will unsticks his tongue from the roof of his mouth. He has no plan, no idea what he's doing or why he's doing it, except that the electric blue of Margot's narrowed eyes is a shade duller than he's ever remembered them being. *Conquered.*

From somewhere far away, he says, "I need a favor first."

Mason's eyes grow comically wide. "A favor? You want a *favor*? You're pulling my leg. You come here under false pretenses, doll yourself up in my clothes, demand my staff bend to your whim, and now you want a favor? My *God*, I should just shoot you now."

"I want to be here," Will says quickly, rubbing his fingers against the heat gathering at his palms. His brain has disconnected from his spinal column and have left his hands quivering. "I want to work with you. We can go right back to how things were, you, me, and Margot. I think you want it as much as I do."

Mason remains silent. His irises are raging.

"You know now what I can do. A second or two and we'd be drowning in fire. The entire Verger Estate razed to the ground, your precious pigs included. I don't want that, though. So, you make me a promise and keep it, and I'll tell you about the FBI."

There's a cacophony of sound building in the base of his skull that he doesn't know what to do with.

Mason's eyes skip briefly to Margot before returning to him. "All right. All right, you have my attention."

Will flattens his prickling palms against his knees and bundles the fabric between his fingers until it hurts. "I want three things," he says, the words sticking in his throat. What he says next surprises him as much as his confession. "Frederick Chilton dead. Abel Gideon dead. And for you to pull whatever strings need to be pulled so Alana Bloom is appointed as the new director of the Baltimore institute."

Only half a heartbeat of time passes, possibly less, before Mason blinks. He blinks again a lets out a bark of a laugh. Then, two barks. By the time he's laughing properly, Will is certain he won't survive the aftermath.

The alpha lifts his glasses to wipe at the tears below one eye. “Oh, God. You had me worried there for a second. God almighty, is that all? Consider it done. They’ve been getting sloppy anyway. Probably for the best. It’ll hamper my ability to gather more of you docile beauties, but so be it.” Mason waves a hand towards Francis and Margot without looking at them. “Call them back, would you? Make it sound urgent. Has the money cleared yet? Never mind, it doesn’t matter.” He looks at Will with an expression so close to fondness it makes Will want to sneer. “I really have missed you, my boy. Welcome back.”

A few hours later, Will stands in his boxers at one of the windows in his bedroom. If he leans far enough to the right, presses his cheek a little against the fire cold pane, he can see the estate’s outdoor pigpen and the raised platform at one of its edges. If he leans just a little more, he can see the blurry outlines of Chilton and Gideon standing with Mason against the reinforced guard railing. Cordell stands behind the trio, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

Pop. Pop.

Will doesn’t hear the gun, though he sees the result. Gideon’s head jerks. Chilton turns to Cordell, his hands raised, shouting something Will can’t hear. As Gideon’s body cants forward, Chilton’s neck snaps back, a dull red-black hole blossoming on his forehead. The power is back under Will’s skin, threatening to split him open.

The doctors fall together into the pen like dancers in a macabre duet. Will stands at the window for a moment longer, until Mason waves an energetic hand up to him, pointing at the pigpen with the other. Will doesn’t wave back.

He takes off his boxers and slips between warm sheets, wrapping the mountain of fabric around himself until he’s cocooned in fragrant warmth. He closes his eyes.

He sleeps like the dead.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!